

## I. Quotes:

A. Our property is ours to distribute, not ours to keep. Gregory the Great.

## II. Introduction

A. When I was about ten, a friend and I stole some candy bars from the local store. We got away with it, so we went back about a half hour later and did it again. And we got away with it, so we went back a third time about a half hour later. And the third time we got caught.

B. The good news is: getting caught saved me from a life of crime, because stealing quickly lost its allure. I have long felt gratitude for the store manager who had me convinced that I was headed to prison for the rest of my life.

C. The bad news is: this wasn't the last time I broke the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment – which reads: **You shall not steal.** Not by a long shot. Now, before you're scandalized or start acting all smug – saying, “I knew it. I knew the first time I saw this guy he was shady, phonier than a \$3-dollar bill; I've always known he had issues.” Before you cope a righteous attitude, let me say, I'm pretty sure you have broken it quite recently as well.

D. This may surprise you – according to a Barna study, 86 percent of adults feel they completely satisfy God's requirements to not steal.<sup>1</sup> But Jesus, who had a lot more to say about money than he did about sex, said some pretty surprising and disruptive things about money. His comments on this front were a lot more threatening and invasive than you might think.

III. We are continuing our series on the Ten Commandments. A set of laws, established by God, revealed to Moses and recorded in both the book of Exodus. Over the last few weeks we have noted that:

A. These laws changed the world – in part by helping establish and shape western civilization.<sup>2</sup>

B. We've noted that these laws divide into two sections - the first four govern our relationship with God and the next six address our relationship with each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, Crossway, 2018, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> One of the many ways these laws were different is that they placed the law above the leader. When God called Moses to Mt. Sinai, he did something unique at the time – he placed the leader under the law. There is a sense that Moses marched up the hill as the absolute leader of the people – religious and otherwise. But after meeting with God he walked down not only carrying the law but under the law as well.

C. We have noted that many complain about these laws, saying that the Ten Commandments are too negative and restrictive

1. But there is a grand positive behind each of them.
2. Being told what we cannot do is a lot less restrictive than being told what we must do.

D. And the world would be a much nicer place if we all kept these laws. But most societies have moved away from them pretty quickly – they rebelled against them, and ended up replacing these ten with about two million of their own.

E. So far we've covered 1-7 and 10, and we now come to number eight. Exodus 20:15, which reads: **you shall not steal.**

1. And as I have noted, it can feel like this is one where you are doing pretty well. "I'm good. Bring it on, Woodruff. Do your worst. Call down fire from heaven on evil thieves. I'll cheer you on because I'm not a thief."
2. But as you may have learned by now, there is a lot more going on here than you might think.

IV. The eighth commandment is initially stated in Exodus and Deuteronomy, where it is 2 words long.

- A. There is a word for *stealing* and a word for *do not*. **You shall not steal.**
- B. The New Testament update and expansion we'll focus on is Eph. 4:28. **He who has been stealing, must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful, so he has something to share with those in need. You shall not steal.**

V. As we step into this, I want to start by noting a four important assumptions that lie behind the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment.

- A. One: Work is a good thing. Lying behind the idea that we should not steal is the idea that we should work and earn what we need. Eph. 4 says that directly. He who steals must stop. They must work, doing something useful so he has something to share with those in need. By the way, we also get this in the fourth commandment – on six days shall you work and do all your labor, and then rest on the seventh. Work is good. Work is expected. It is necessary. We are called to be givers not takers. Work is good.
- B. Two: A second assumption behind the commandment to not steal is that we have a right to own things – the eighth commandment assumes personal property.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ex. 21:28-22:15; Lev. 19

1. Now, to be clear: God ultimately owns everything. He created everything and retains all rights. What we see when we look out the window is not Mother Nature but Divine Creation. And we would do well to call it that.<sup>4</sup>
2. Everything on the asset side of our balance sheet is on loan. We're stewards of God's stuff, investment managers who will be held accountable for what we do with what is temporarily entrusted to us. We are under orders.<sup>5</sup> This is not a small point.
3. However, it is OK to have things. We are not the ultimate owners, but we can be the private steward of things.
4. The major political experiment of the last century argued the opposite. Marxism claimed that everything was to be held in common. It was against private property. And it didn't work. Every place the communist experiment has been tried it has failed.<sup>6</sup> I would argue that it fails because it lacks a biblical understanding of human nature, and also because it claims for the state rights that the state does not have - it violates the order assumed by God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In Genesis 1 and John 1 we are told that God spoke it into being—out of nothing—in a creative process we do not understand and will never duplicate—no matter what level of scientific or technological mastery we gain. And that means that He owns it all. And He claims all rights: 1) Psalm 24:1 says: The earth is the Lords and the fullness thereof, the world and all who live in it; 2) Psalm 89:11 reads: The heavens are Yours, the earth also is Yours; the world and all its fullness. You have founded them.

<sup>5</sup> The church is probably guilty of spending too much time talking about stewardship before it first talks about being a steward. And the difference is huge. On the one hand we approach the issue by thinking, "I am expected to give away what is mine." On the other we think, "I am given a chance to hold onto some of what is not mine."

<sup>6</sup> One way to get a feel for the failure of Marxism is to watch Dr. Zhivago, or read Boris Pasternek's Nobel Prize winning book. In it he describes the devastating effect of Marxism on the human soul and one of his major points dealt with property. The protagonist, Yuri Androiovich, is a wealthy young man who comes back from the war to find that his home has been liberated by the people. And his wife and child have been limited to just one room of their former house. All decisions are made by votes of the people and with each vote Yuri and his family loose more and more. Then are eventually voted out of their city home and so they move out to the county. But before long that home is liberated also. You follow his life as it makes less and less sense

<sup>7</sup> Now you might say – wait a minute. I thought we were supposed to hold all things in common. To share and share alike. Isn't that what goes on in the book of Acts. The book of Acts, of course, opens with the disciples huddled in the corner of a room in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit comes upon them and their lives change dramatically. And consequently the book chronicles both the beginning and the spread of the church. And in Acts 4:32 we read: "All believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them." This may seem like it advocates for a

C. A third assumption is that things are not bad - stuff is not intrinsically evil.

1. Every classic religion other than Christianity downgrades stuff. It elevates the spiritual over the material: 1) Eastern religions see matter as illusory - not ultimate reality; it will pass away while the spiritual will not; 2) The Greeks saw the material world as bad and celebrated the ideal idea, the nonmaterial archetype.

**2.** This kind of thinking made a run against the early church. It was eventually labeled Gnosticism, and it shows up in the New Testament as the writers repeatedly argued against it. The biggest fight is over Jesus – who the Gnostics said was God but not actually a real man. They argued that he didn't have a body. John opens his letter going right after this, saying: **That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.**

3. Christianity is a world-affirming, matter-affirming worldview. It is earthy. And we really need to see this, because it has profound implications.

a) It means our physical lives matter – and so do our neighbors. This is why we get so much instruction to care for the physical needs of others. This is why the church has both elders and deacons – because we are called to the ministry of the word and deed. This is why the gifts God gives to us are made up of abilities that address both spiritual and physical matters. This is why Jesus said, “If you see a person without food and clothing and you do nothing, how can you claim the love of God is in you? Matter matters.

b) The fact that the world is good means we can enjoy things. We are not called to asceticism. There are always legalistic strains that call on us to live in poverty, but that is not what we see in the Bible.

c) The fact that matter matters is what led Christians to pioneer science. Some ancients held that the world was God and it was wrong to run tests on it; others held it was worthless.

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form of socialism, but: 1) This was a collection of Christians not an entire country; 2) more importantly, “no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own.” In other words, it was theirs. But they were willing to share it freely. That is a very different thing than saying you must. And we get the same points from the story of Ananias and Sapphira – i.e., they owned property

D. A fourth assumption – which is buried a bit deeper, and which I have noted earlier in this series, but not enough - is that we are to treat others well because of God – we serve others because of God.

1. I do not think I have made near enough of the fact that the second six commandments are based on the first four. We have to start with God. It all flows out of our knowledge of God. Not many people get this.<sup>8</sup>
2. Some time back, the church of Scotland was having a big conclave in Glasgow, and the Mayor got up to address them. And said, “You spend a lot of time discussing God, doctrine, etc. I am not a theologian. Most of us are not. Most of this doesn’t matter to us. Here is what does: how can we love our neighbor? How can we get along?”
3. This is the sort of thinking we hear today. “What you believe about God is not critical. It’s social problems that are. It’s how we get along. Modern people want to jump to commandment five. That is not the way it works. And the only reason people think this way is because of a residual Christian ethic. But as Nietzsche noted, that halo effect doesn’t last. When you ignore God you do not get peace on earth, you get chaos.
4. Commandments 5 – 10 are based on Commandments 1-4. Before Jesus says, “Love your neighbor,” he says, “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength.” He grounds our obligation to our neighbor back to God.
5. Otherwise, why should I act in any way other than what I think is in my own best interest? “Mr. Mayor, why should I be nice to my neighbor? On what basis? Why deny myself something I want if I can just take it? Why not be selfish?”
6. If there is no God – if we are not accountable, if there is no life after death - then what are we? The only reasonable answer is that there is no difference between humans and animas – we are naked apes, we are just bags of chemicals, feelings not-with-standing. And it doesn’t matter.
7. Who is to say how one bag of chemicals should treat another? Modern people do not like the idea of a God who judges, who hands down moral law, but if there is no moral law, why follow the arbitrary law made up by others?
8. The Bible says all of these commandments are based on a fact: we are not animals; we are not a bag of chemicals. We are mini models made after God’s image, personality, rationality. We all have dignity that must be respected. If we trample on them, we tear God’s picture.

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Tim Keller for this illustration, it’s from one of his two sermons on the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment.

E. There are other underlying assumptions – such as the fact that we were made to care for things.

1. Keller argues that part of being human is caring for stuff, which is: 1) why home ownership is so important; 2) why socialism doesn't work; he says it's: 3) one of the reasons new things make us feel good and; 4) it's part of the reason why incarceration is so punitive.<sup>9</sup>

2. Leonard Reed argues down a different path, noting that stealing robs us of a life-value we need.<sup>10</sup>

VI. There are other assumptions under the surface, but let's move on. Exodus 20:15 Reads: **Do not steal. You shall not steal.**

VII. I've been around too long to think that there are not people in this room who are guilty of straight up violations of the eighth commandment.

A. Like me in third grade, you have taken things that are not yours. Cheated on your taxes or stolen from your employer. Perhaps it's an ongoing problem. We all have issues. In this room are all kinds of problems – I'm not just talking about greed and pride and anger, but adultery, domestic violence, addictions of all types.

B. I know there are people here who steal because: 1) of the stats – there are hundreds of billions of dollars of shrinkage every year; there is a robbery every minute; a car is stolen every 27 seconds. Someone is doing all of this. 2) I know someone is stealing because I've been a pastor for thirty years – so I know that we clean up well – and money allows us to hide many of our problems – but there are problems; and 3) I know there are people struggling with sin issues because I know my own heart. The longer I follow Christ the more darkness I see in my own heart – I do think that by God's grace, I am becoming better – less selfish, less prideful - but the longer I look at God, the more I look at Jesus – the more I

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<sup>9</sup> All other commandments are based on something God put into us when he made us human. We should honor families b/c abuse is dehumanizing. To misuse sex is to turn us into an object. Just as we were built for sex and family, we were also built to take care of things. We were built to have things and take care of them. To take away things from others depersonalizes them. We were put on earth to have and care for material things – may not sound quite as spiritual as other commandments. This is part of the reasons why incarceration is one of the most dehumanizing things. This is part of the reason why socialism doesn't work. We lose our sense of responsibility; This is why when we are robbed, we feel violated. It's not just stuff, it's our identity. And it's part of **the reason** why buying new things gives us pleasure. Things that go beyond what you would expect. We get a sense of significance and worth from this.

<sup>10</sup> See the work, The Something for Nothing Syndrome.

realize that He is holier than I thought and I am more fallen than I thought, and I need more grace than I realized.

1. I ran across a great Dallas Willard quote during my devotional reading this week. Attacking the notion that grace is only for the forgiveness of sins – that it's only non-Christians coming to faith who need grace – Willard said: “The sinner is not the one who uses a lot of grace; the saint uses more grace. The saint burns grace like a 747 burns fuel on takeoff.

C. Look, I do not know if this is your issue or not, but I know:

1. That you have issues. And I hope you have someone to share them with. I hope that you can be honest about your struggles with someone. Some small groups do this so well. The leaders are open about their own struggles and others also feel safe to share their issues – and people are not scandalized by it. They do not act like you are an anomaly. We are called to be communities of grace, hope and love. What you want – what you need – are people who accept you where you are and call you (and help you) face the challenges and strongholds of sin and move on.

2. And by the way, I know that if you have experienced that grace you will share it with others. If you are here thinking you are better than those who struggle – better than the liar or the alcoholic or porn-addict or the thief! – you not only do not understand yourself or the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment, I dare say you do not understand the Gospel. Those who have been changed by grace are gracious to others.

D. So, all of that to say, I would not be surprised if some of you struggle with stealing. However, I also expect that many of you are feeling OK when you hear the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment. You think, I haven't mugged anyone in the last few weeks. I didn't steal candy bars like the pastor did. So let me tell you what this commandment includes.

VIII. The Heidelberg Catechism unpacks this commandment in a bit more detail.

A. Remember, in an effort to help people grow, the church has developed a series of questions that people would study. The Heidelberg Catechism was drafted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. **And it speaks directly to the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment by asking two questions. First: Q - What does God forbid in the eighth commandment? A: God forbids not only outright theft and robbery**

1. OK, think stealing, mugging, breaking and entry

B. **but also such wicked schemes and devices as false weights and measures, deceptive merchandizing, counterfeit money and usury (high interest rates).**

1. When I hear false weights, I think of this classic picture SLIDE by Leslie Thrasher – it's from a 1936 cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

C. The point being, there are more “white collar” ways to steal, and these include things like: 1) Not doing our best work – which equates to stealing our employers time; 2) Not paying our employees a fair wage – stealing their time; 3) Not paying taxes or debts, or 4) padding the expense account;

D. In his book on ethics, Louis Smeedes looks at applications of the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment, such as: 1) Creative ad directors misleading and manipulating people to buy something they do not need or maybe even something that is not even good for them; 2) corporations bribing officials to accept a bid for work done for something other than lowest bid; 2) rich nations exploiting the resources of a poor nation – stealing from them.

E. The Catechism goes on: **We must not defraud our neighbor in any way, whether by force or by show of might. In addition, God forbids all greed and all abuse or squandering of his gifts.**<sup>11</sup>

F. Don't miss this – big point. This suggests we steal from our neighbor by not serving them, which leads into the second question – which suggests we not only steal by taking what isn't ours, but by keeping what was not ours to keep.

G. Question two: **What does God require of you in the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment?**  
**A: I must promote my neighbor's good whenever I can and may deal with him as I would like others to deal with me, and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need.**

H. This changes everything. It is arguing that we not only break the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment when we shop lift, but when we fail to love and serve.

I. There is an old joke: when is a door not a door? When it's ajar?<sup>12</sup> When is a thief not a thief? When he stops stealing? No. When he is generous. In Paul's mind there is nothing between a thief and radically generous person – you are one or the other. Or, to put a finer point on this: if you are not generous – if you are not proactively kind to others - you are a thief taking from others what God intends for you to share with them. You are guilty of breaking the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment.

J. Remember the starting assumptions – one of them is that everything belongs to God – including our time and talent. We are trustees not owners. And we are expected to invest his resources in ways that advance His kingdom.

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<sup>11</sup> Ex. 22:1, I Cor. 5:9,10; 6:9, 10; Deut 25:13-15; Ps. 15:5; Pv. 11:1, 12:22, Ezek. 45:9-12; Lk 6:35; Micah 6:9-11; Lk 3:14; Jas. 5:1-6; Lk. 12:15; Eph. 5:5, Prv. 21:20, 23:20, Lk 16:10

<sup>12</sup> This joke – and much of this section – comes from Tim Keller's sermon on this commandment.

IX. We see this in a number of passages. Let me note two:

A. Malachi 3 is one of the classic passages that uses the word stealing and link us back to the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment.

1. It reads: **Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. “But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’ “In tithes and offerings. <sup>9</sup> You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. <sup>10</sup> Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.**

2. This is a passage that makes it clear that everything belongs to him and we get to hold back 90%. But God expects at least ten percent of his money to go to his priorities: 1) the poor; 2) the church; 3) those in a covenant relationship with you (family, neighbors, friends). We are expected to be generous. If we are not, we are robbing God.

3. If we are not radically generous, we are a thief

B. I Timothy 17-19 is a second place we see this: **Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. <sup>19</sup> In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.**

1. There are three ideas I want to note here as I wrap things up. The first is that we are commanded to serve – to be rich in good deeds. Which I understand to mean, we are called to a simpler lifestyle

a) It does not suggest we have to be ascetics. It does not suggest we have to give it all away, can’t enjoy any nice things. But there is clearly an expectation that we will live below our means because we are giving so much away.

b) Men and women, your generosity should impact your lifestyle. It should have an impact on the vacations you take, house you live in, car you drive – something.

2. The second suggestion is that doing so should be easy. If you get the Gospel, it should be easy. I have been forgiven – God’s grace is showered on me. I gain eternal life. Christ took my guilt upon his body. Deciding not to trick out my car with every option is not a hardship. Not having enough money to do everything I want is not a hardship.

3. Third, I want you to note that the Bible doesn’t use guilt to motivate us to be generous – it points to all that has been done for us, it points to grace and it makes promises that giving is in our eternal interest.

X. Let me pull this all together. There is a lot packed into the two words we find in the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment

A. Assumptions: work is good, ownership is good; the world is good; and because our neighbors are good – have value because they have been made in God’s image and matter to God – we should treat them well.

B. Second: we are called to not take things we didn’t pay for.

C. And third: we are called to not keep all that we have.