

The 8th Command: The Generous Life

Exodus 20:15

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I have some dear friends from the South who I have known for 25 years or more. They are really great Christian people. We were stunned a few weeks ago when they told us what happened to them. They had recently built a new home in a very safe neighborhood. Their daughter and grandkids were visiting; one granddaughter was swimming in the pool. My friends were inside the house. Out of the bushes came two armed men with ski masks. They pointed guns at the nine-year-old granddaughter and said, "Get out of the pool now!" Everyone else was inside not knowing what was unfolding. Through the back door they came—the granddaughter and two masked men pointing guns. They ordered them to line up with their hands in the air. They said, "Into the master bedroom everyone." As they marched them toward who knows what, my friend asked them, "Do you know Jesus as your Savior?"

Now I don't know what I would be thinking in a moment like that but seeing it as an evangelistic opportunity wouldn't be high on my list of priorities. But he asked him, "Do you know Jesus?" The masked gunman said, "Yes I do, but I don't want to talk about it right now." In the bedroom, the gunman took all their cell phones and threw them in the toilet. They duct taped them all, took their jewelry, cash, etc., asked for the keys to the BMW and said, "We're not stealing the car; the cops will find it nearby." They took everything, got in the car, and drove out of the neighborhood in the luxury car as if they lived there. My friends eventually got out of the tape and one of the cell phones still worked. They called the authorities. They found their car a few miles away. Weeks later they still have not caught the guys but we know at least one of them claims Jesus as his Savior.

That is a true story. It just happened. Why is there something inherently contradictory about a man in a mask carrying a gun and robbing people claiming to be a follower of Jesus? Who was the true Christian—the guy in the mask pointing the gun or my friend caring for the eternity of the men robbing them at gunpoint? While we instinctively know, what does stealing indicate about a thief's heart and what does giving indicate about a genuine Christian's heart? Let's get into it.

Exodus 20:15 says, "*You shall not steal.*" That's how the ESV translates it. Here is the NASB: "*You shall not steal.*" The NIV translates it, "*You shall not steal.*" How does the KJV do it? You guessed it, "*Thou shalt not steal.*" So there's not much lost in translation here. "*You shall not steal.*" But what is stealing and what underlying truth makes it stealing?

What is Stealing?

Ask a kid and he would probably say *taking something that is not yours*. That is a pretty good definition. But what makes something yours or not yours and somebody else's property?

This is a bigger question than we may realize and entire nations have risen and fallen on this question. When the Russian Bolshevik revolution happened in 1917 led by Lenin, the underlying philosophy was "what's yours is now ours." Communism is a political system that denies or limits private property. Socialism is similar but more of an economic policy that centralizes ownership and control in government. Think of the millions of people who died in

the past century because of a political philosophy denying private rights to ownership and property. You don't want a Communist as a neighbor as Ukraine is finding out right now. Was Russia taking Crimea a "crim-e-a"?

Behind this command is the underlying ethical assumption of the goodness of ownership in the first place and the ethical requirement to respect other people's right to private property. But we haven't really defined stealing yet. How about we use Martin Luther's definition? "Taking advantage of our neighbor in any sort of dealing that results in loss to him." (Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, p. 39)

There are ways to steal that don't mean I take something from somebody but my actions result in a direct loss to them. So for example, if I infringe on the copyrights of a recording label by copying music files or movies which they have a right to, I may not be taking something from them but I am not giving them what they deserve. Do I have your attention now? *God doesn't care about my pirated music library does he? That's not stealing because they don't need the money. It's not that bad because it's not that much.*

How about a more comfortable example: is it ethical for a government to tax its citizens and then waste that money, or worse, use it to enrich political allies? Is that stealing? Or what about my college friends who would not put stamps on their envelopes and make the return address the actual the address they wanted it sent to? If you're thinking that's a great idea, this message is for you. Is it only Enron executives that are stealing? Is it the size of the theft that matters in the eyes of God or do stamps matter? Here's the Heidelberg Catechism on this:

"God forbids not only those thefts and robberies which are punishable by the magistrate; but he comprehends under the name of theft, all wicked tricks and devices, whereby we design to appropriate to ourselves the good which belong to our neighbor; whether it be by force, or under the appearance of right; as by unjust weights...measures, fraudulent merchandise, false coins, usury, or by any other way forbidden [by] God; as also all covetousness, all waste and abuse of his gifts." (*The Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 298)

The Catechism points out something maybe you are also thinking. The eighth command is really the merging of the first command and the tenth command. The first command was, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" (Exodus 20:3 ESV) The tenth command is, "*You shall not covet...anything that is your neighbor's.*" (Exodus 20:17) Stealing violates the first command by loving what somebody else has more than God's pleasure. It violates the tenth command by craving what somebody else has and seeking illegitimate means of attaining it.

In the narrow sense, Scripture notes the following forms of theft (John M. Frame, *Pastoral and Social Ethics*, www.ntslibrary.com, p. 264):

- Property theft (Exodus 22:4, 7)
- Kidnapping (Exodus 21:16)
- Swindling (Amos 8:4-6)
- Stealing from widows and orphans (Matthew 23:14)
- Defrauding employees (James 5:4)
- Land theft (Isaiah 5:8)
- Unjust weights (Leviticus 19:35-36)
- Misleading someone for economic gain (Proverbs 20:14)

To these we can add gambling, defrauding on taxes, bogus insurance claims, identity theft, schemes to save money at other's expense, not working while on the clock, failing to

compensate fairly, and stealing from God by not giving offerings and tithes to him. The list could go on as the human mind is a factory of Ponzi schemes.

Since the first and tenth commands basically cover stealing anyway, why do you think God doubles down by giving stealing its own top ten command? ***The selfishness of sin is most easily expressed by being a taker instead of a giver.*** Stealing is about God. All the commands are. They all tell us what God is like. God is supremely worthy so idolatry is sin and profaning his name is blasphemy and taking the life of an image bearer is so serious. All of these commands flow from the character of God. What about stealing? What does that tell us about God?

Is God a Giver or a Taker?

The answer here is blatantly obvious but I ask it so we see what makes stealing so anti-God. Every theft, kidnapping, fraud, embezzlement, shoplifting, and a thousand more subtle examples re-enacts Eve reaching for the fruit of the tree. In a sense, the very first sin was stealing. Adam and Eve took what wasn't theirs to have. But who suffered the real loss? Adam and Eve. Whenever we take what isn't ours to have, we are the ones who suffer the true loss. They lost their moral innocence. They lost divine pleasure. They lost their home, their trust and affection, and their lives, all because they stole what they did not have a right to have. This is how temptation always works. It promises gain and good but delivers pain and sorrow.

"Satan gives Adam fruit and takes away Paradise. Therefore in all temptations let us consider not what he offers, but what we shall lose." (Richard Sibbes) That is great advice. Sin is a taker and a destroyer. But what about God? Is God a thief? Is God a taker? Here we must see how and why stealing is so wrong. It is the moral polar opposite of a God whose very nature is to give and empty himself for others' good and joy. He is a generous God.

The generosity of God seen in...

The Trinity

- *"Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."* (1 John 4:8)
- *"The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand."* (John 3:35)
- *"For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing."* (John 5:20)
- *"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."* (John 6:38)

The essence of God is love, and the Trinity is the place where that self-giving love has eternally been expressed. The Father loves the Son. The Son loves the Father. The Spirit loves the Son and the Father. *"God is love."* (1 John 4:8) In that context of eternal abiding love, can you imagine the Spirit stealing something from the Son? Never! The purpose of the Spirit is to glorify the Son. Jesus says about the Spirit, *"He will glorify me."* (John 16:14) Within the Trinity, there are no security cameras, no locks on the relational doors, no confidentiality agreements, no fear of any defrauding or injuring of another. Why? The burning center of the Godhead is eternal and abiding love. *"Perfect love casts out fear"* (1 John 4:18) and there is no fear within the Godhead.

Creation

This beautiful creation we live in is an expression of the generosity of God. The atheist looks at the sunset or the Coldstone ice cream and thinks, *amazing what evolution has given us*. The Christian sees the same and gives thanks to God for his overflowing generosity in this amazingly beautiful creation.

Salvation

Here is where the generosity of God is most evident to us.

- *"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 by his poverty might become rich."* (2 Corinthians 8:9)
- *"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."* (Philippians 2:4-8)

Both of these emphasize the generosity of God to us through Jesus. The gospel is the exact opposite of stealing. Not only does God not steal, he gives to the undeserving. Jesus gave by emptying himself of the glorious privileges that were his as God. This includes his humiliation in becoming human. Not only did God become one of us, but he gave his very life for us. Romans 8:32 says, *"[God] did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all."*

The picture at Golgotha is so very poignant to the eighth command. There were three crucified on crosses. The one in the middle was Jesus. What crime had those on this right and left committed? They were thieves. We don't know what they took but they must have defrauded in a substantial way to be sentenced to death for doing so. On the right, was a thief; a taker. On the left was a thief; a taker. In the middle is the one who created everything and owns everything, yet on the middle cross is the greatest giver of all time. Two takers and one giver.

This is love. Hate robs and steals. Love is not simply the absence of taking but the presence of self-giving. Remember, every negative command has a corresponding positive one. When is a thief no longer a thief? *"Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need."* (Ephesians 4:28 NIV)

When is a thief no longer a thief? Not simply when he doesn't shoplift or cheat on his taxes but when the taker becomes a giver. Not only does he stop taking what others have, but he isn't selfish with what he does have. In this we reflect the very character of God, not as a taker but as a giver.

Let's go back to the story of my friend being robbed. There were two men there claiming to be Christians. Both knew about Jesus. Both made a profession of faith. But one has a mask on, is holding a gun, and taking what isn't his. The other, while being robbed, is concerned with the thief's eternal destiny. One is clearly a taker, but the other is not a taker and is actually giving grace to the very one stealing from him.

This is a powerful picture of God. We are all thieves and robbers. We rob God of his glory every day. We take. We scheme. We rob God of his right as our Creator to rule our lives.

We live for money and things and lie and cheat to get them. We steal from him in some way every day. Yet in the midst of our stealing from him, he gives grace to us. He gives and he gives and he gives. Thieves can be saved if they will believe and turn from their sin. Exhibit A is the thief on the cross:

"One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" (Luke 23:39-43 ESV)

The eighth command, like all the others, condemns us. But thieves can be saved by the lavish generosity of our self-giving God in Christ, if you will believe. Beware: God turns takers into givers. Why would he do that? You'll have to come back next week for the answer.

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