

The Ten Commandments 8. You shall not steal

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You shall not steal

Exodus 20:15 (RSV)

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1. The 8th Commandment. Introduction

You shall not steal.

- Exodus 20:15 (NRSV)

The Hebrew verb *g-n-v* (steal):

- lacks an explicit object; the object can be a person or object.
- has the nuance of taking by stealth.
- Rabbinic tradition and some modern scholars suggest that kidnapping was the intended meaning (“You shall not steal a person”). The previous two commandments dealt with “capital” offenses, so this one logically should also.
- The majority of scholars say the lack of an object is intended, giving an expansive scope to the Commandment.

Brueggemann: “You shall not steal a person” not necessarily limiting. In ancient Israel:

- selfhood understood to “include the necessary ‘goods’ to make a life of dignity possible”
- (Fretheim): property understood “to be an extension of the ‘self’ of its owner, so that theft of property is a violation of person, not just a person’s wealth.”

2. At the Heart of the Commandment

God’s creational intention:

- “God dignifies human beings by giving them work to do, from which they can expect to receive some of the fruits of their labor. . .” (Fretheim)
 - Genesis 2:15-16: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; . . .”
- God gives many gifts to us for our enjoyment

Theft is the failure to accept this creational intention of God. It is the failure to accept:

- the fruits of the labors of Others.
- the gifts given Others by God.

A positive reading of the Commandment:

We should protect, honor, and celebrate:

- the fruits of the labors of Others
- the gifts given Others by God

3. Theft of Material Property

Examples:

- burglary
- shoplifting
- failing to return lost property
- not reporting all our income on an income tax form
- not returning excess money received from a malfunctioning ATM machine
- not paying for a missing item on a restaurant check
- failing to correct a bank error in our favor
- paying half price for a “child” ticket for a child just turned thirteen

Many such thefts can deceptively appear “victimless” because the theft is spread over a large number of individuals or a large organization.

More Examples:

- Failure to pay a just price for the labor or the fruits of the labor of Another:
- buying a food item that does not cover the costs of the farmer’s labor
- paying a laborer a wage insufficient for living in dignity
- If charity is an obligation (= distributing in our role as Stewards the resources which Others need), then:
 - failure to contribute generously to fight poverty, hunger, famine
 - failure to tithe to the Church

4. Non-material Thefts

Non-material thefts can include:

Theft of Creativity

- plagiarism
- failing to credit a felicitous turn of phrase or idea

Theft of Knowledge

- deliberately misleading someone
- flattering a person dishonestly

Theft of Opinion and Feelings

- deceiving another so they have an excessively high opinion of ourselves, or feel grateful to us when we are undeserving

Theft of Time

- keeping Another waiting by being late

Theft of Reputation

- gossiping, engaging in the “language of hurt”

Theft from Future Generations

- wasteful use of Natural Resources

5. The Victims of Theft

Those that we wrong and sin against in a theft are:

- the person we steal from
- God,
 - whose creational intention is that each person enjoy the fruits of their labors and the gifts God has given to them
 - who has established methods for the distribution of the divine bounty

6. Restorative Justice and Restitution

In Israel

- theft of property a “tort” -- injured party should be restored as much as possible to their original condition
- theft of a person (kidnapping) was punishable by death

The intention is that in most thefts, justice requires an attempt must be made to restore the victim as much as possible to his or her original situation.

The capital punishment for kidnapping reflects the extreme seriousness of theft of a person, and perhaps the recognition that full restoration of the victim to her or her original situation is often not possible.

7. Partners in Crime

We become “partners” in a theft if we enjoy the benefits of the theft. *Examples:*

- buy a stolen item
- advance in the company hierarchy after gossip we were not responsible for “steals” the reputation and hence chances for advancement of a rival
- live comfortably, our house, food, clothing, entertainment dependant on the labor of Others who are paid an unjust wage for their work

8. Nature of Ownership

8.1. The Ambiguities of Ownership in a World of Economic Disparity

Ownership:

- is not a natural right, but comes from the grace of God
- carries responsibilities to use our wealth as a resource for the needs of Others (Stewardship)

It is God's creational intention that:

- We and Others enjoy the fruits of our labors and the gifts God has given to us
- There should be no poverty. “There will, however, be no one in need among you.” (Deuteronomy 15:4 NRSV). All selves should have the material goods necessary for a life of dignity

The positive side of the Eighth Commandment calls us to protect and celebrate the fruits of the labors of Others and the gifts given them by God.

Yet the world is rank with poverty, hunger, with enormous disparity between the “haves” and “have-nots.” What does it mean?

Questions we must ask:

- Are we receiving more than what is justified by the “fruits of our labors”?
- Is our wealth based in part on theft from others (unjust wages, exploitation of the resources of other countries)?
- Are we doing our part to protect the fruits of the labor of Others, the gifts God has given to Others in the world?
- Are we good stewards, using our wealth as a resource for the needs of Others?

Themes on Wealth in the New Testament include (from Wheeler):

- Wealth as a resource of human needs
- Wealth as a symptom of economic injustice

8.2. Wealth as a Resource for Human Needs

Ownership carries concrete and wide-ranging responsibilities. Supporting scripture includes:

- Matthew 5:42: “Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” (NRSV)
- Luke 6:30: “Give to everyone who begs from you, and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.” (NRSV)
- Luke 14:12-14
- Romans 12:20: “if your enemies are hungry feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink” (NRSV)

8.3. Wealth as a Symptom of Economic Injustice

There is a deep suspicion and concern in the New Testament that wealth in a world rampant with enormous disparities between the haves and the have-nots may be a sign that our wealth is culpable, the “fruit” of economic injustice.

If so, there are therefore two reasons why we should respond to the needs of Others:

- we are called to share those gifts that are rightfully ours.
- part of our wealth may be “stolen.” We must try to restore that which we have stolen or are partners in stealing.

Supporting scripture includes:

- James 5:1-6
- Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-26)
- Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46)

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