

# WEEK 9: DO NOT STEAL

## EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19



### The Place of the Passage

The eighth commandment is the last of the two-word commandments. In Hebrew, the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments are just two words each: “not murder,” “not adulterate,” and “not steal.” With remarkable brevity these three commandments form a trio of simple yet profound pillars of justice in the second table of the Decalogue. Respect for a neighbor’s life, respect for marriage and for one’s own and one another’s sexuality, and respect for property are essential for a society of love. As we have seen, these “do not” commands also require the opposite “do.” In the present consideration, “do not steal” also expects “do be generous.” Thus the apostle Paul applies this commandment when he exhorts, “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” (Eph. 4:28).

### The Big Picture

Respect for the property of others and generosity with one’s own possessions are required tenets of love.

**Reflection and Discussion**

Read the eighth commandment from either Exodus or Deuteronomy. Also read the expanded applications of this commandment in Deuteronomy 23:19–25; 24:7, 10–15, 19–22. Use the following questions to help you consider the commandment’s meaning and implications. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 176–177, 340; online at [www.esv.org](http://www.esv.org).)

**The Commandment**

Two words for seizing another’s property are common in biblical Hebrew. The word *gazal* means to steal by force, such as by armed robbery. The word *ganab* refers to property taken by cheating, deception, or manipulation. Both forms of theft are wrong, but the latter term (*ganab*) is the example cited in the eighth commandment. Discuss the significance of this word choice.

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Few are so brazen as the thief who breaks into someone else’s house in order to steal. What are some of the more subtle temptations you and others face to cheat or to manipulate in order to increase personal profit at the expense of others?

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It is not enough to avoid stealing the property of others; the seventh commandment also expects generosity with one’s own property (Eph. 4:28). Why is it so

hard to be generous? Why is it that those who are already poor are often also the most generous (Mark 12:41–44)?

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God is bringing his people into a “land flowing with milk and honey.” The land will produce abundant crops under their hands because “the LORD your God cares for” it (Deut. 11:8–12). The land and its fruitfulness are entrusted to the people by the Lord. How should that understanding shape our attitude toward “our” income?

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### **Applications of the Commandment**

Many laws in Deuteronomy offer further lessons on what it means not to steal. Read, for example, Deuteronomy 23:19–20, mindful that “your brother” refers to a neighbor in need and “foreigner” in this context refers to a traveling merchant. What does this law about not charging interest on loans to the poor versus charging interest on business loans teach about just economics?

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Deuteronomy 23:21–23 warns against promising an offering to God (a “vow” is a promised offering) and then not following through on it. How should the eighth commandment guide our worship?

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Deuteronomy 23:24–25 uses an ancient example to help us consider a timeless challenge. What is the proper balance between social responsibility with one’s increase and one’s private rights to that increase? How does this law shed light on this question?

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Deuteronomy 24:10–13 teaches us to respect the property of others even when they are indebted to us. What lessons can we draw from this law for financial ethics<sup>1</sup> today?

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Deuteronomy 24:17–18 teaches the people to remember their own oppression in Egypt in order to motivate their generous dealings with others. What suffering in your own past can you bring to mind to strengthen your own generosity?

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Deuteronomy 24:19–22 teaches the people to be “sloppy” in their work in ways that benefit the needy. How could this example from an agrarian society apply in a modern industrialized and technology-based society?

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Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

### Gospel Glimpses

**GENEROSITY.** We have no inherent rights to own anything, not even the air God gives that we breathe or the ground he formed on which we stand. Apart from God’s generosity, every breath we breathe would be an act of theft! Yet God is a giving God, sending his goodness on all humans (Matt. 5:45) and his saving grace on those who receive his Son (John 1:12). The eighth commandment points to the generosity of God from whom we must not steal, yet from whom we receive so much.

**JESUS KEPT THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT.** The Creator and owner of the universe emptied himself and became poor (Phil. 2:1–7). What a marvel of God’s love! In the Gospels we encounter many narratives in which Jesus provides miraculously for others, multiplying bread and fish to feed the multitudes (John 6:1–15), turning water into wine for a friend’s wedding (John 2:1–11), and even miraculously providing money for a tax collector (Matt. 17:24–27). But Jesus refuses to turn stones into bread for his own hunger (Luke 4:3–4), he has no home to make his own (Matt. 8:20), and his greatest moment of outrage is against religion that is turned into a means for profit (Matt. 21:12–13). Jesus is the model of abundant generosity with others and contentment for himself. Jesus kept the law perfectly, including his fulfillment of the eighth commandment, making him the suitable substitute to achieve our atonement.

## Whole-Bible Connections

**GREED IS JUDGED.** Property theft is a frequent theme in Scripture, beginning with Adam's stealing the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1–7). God confronted Adam for his theft and cursed the ground's fruitfulness as a result (Gen. 3:17–19). The rest of humanity after Adam began to cultivate the ground's fruits, but theft also became a feature among sinful humans striving to gain increase by easier methods. Greed is identified as one of the leading reasons for oppression by the powerful within Israel (Jer. 5:24–29; Amos 6:1–7) and the conquests of invading powers such as Assyria (Isa. 10:13–14) and Babylon (2 Kings 20:12–19). But in the end all greed and theft will be judged. John describes this judgment in his vision of Babylon, drunk with wealth and power, being cast down forever (Rev. 18:1–24).

**PRODUCING AND SHARING.** Greed and theft are sinful, whereas producing fruits and sharing that bounty are thematic features of God's promised good for his people. The garden of Eden was a place of abundance specifically for Adam to cultivate and enjoy (Gen. 2:5–17). The land of Canaan was likewise a land of rich fields and resources (Deut. 8:7–10). God intends for his people to create wealth, and the Bible repeatedly teaches the importance of acknowledging that wealth as being from the Lord by sharing it with the poor, the marginalized, and those in need (Deut. 16:11–17).

## Theological Soundings

**THE HEART OF GREED.** The commandments are expressed in terms of behavior, but they are designed to address the covetous<sup>2</sup> attitudes represented by those behaviors as well. "You shall not steal" confronts both the act of stealing and the heart of greed that typically motivates it. Sometimes theft is motivated by other causes. Proverbs 6:30 concedes, "People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry." Stealing out of hunger is still wrong (Prov. 6:31), but it is stealing out of greed that is especially heinous—and dangerous (1 Tim. 6:10)—and it is such a desire that this commandment particularly confronts.

**STEWARDSHIP.** The doctrine of stewardship is anchored in the eighth commandment. God is the true owner of all things, and it is from him first of all that we must not steal. When God shares his possessions with us and others, we must respect the way in which he chooses to distribute them. It is not our place to wrongfully seize from others what providence has granted to them (stealing). But it is our responsibility to use the possessions he has entrusted to us in keeping with his purposes. Stewardship is a distinctive doctrine of biblical faith rooted in the eighth commandment.

**A THEOLOGY OF ECONOMICS.** Two parties are implied in the eighth commandment: the one who owns something and the one who does not own that thing. The command for the latter not to steal from the former is primarily not about property but about relationship. Furthermore, the command not to steal does not hinder one from receiving what he or she is lacking from the one who has, through generosity or sale. This command expects that transfer of goods will take place through relationships of honesty and generosity. God calls his people to build communities of love, with property stewardship as a means to foster that love. In two simple Hebrew words the eighth commandment lays the foundation for a theology of economics rooted in relationships of love.

**Personal Implications**

Considering what you have learned in this study, reflect on the Decalogue's eighth commandment as it informs your faith and instructs your faithfulness today. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

**1. Gospel Glimpses**

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**2. Whole-Bible Connections**

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**3. Theological Soundings**

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**4. Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19**

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**As You Finish This Unit . . .**

**If you are memorizing the Decalogue during this study, practice reciting the preface and the first through eighth commandments. Pray to thank God for establishing his covenant with you, to redeem you and to make you holy.**

**Definitions**

<sup>1</sup> **Ethics** – In Christian theology, the study of morality, justice, and virtue in light of the Bible’s teachings.

<sup>2</sup> **Covetousness** – The desire to have something (or someone) that belongs to another. Covetousness is forbidden in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5:21).