

VIII: Not Stealing

Good morning everyone, it's great to see you all. My name is Eric if I haven't had the chance to meet you yet. If you're just now joining us, we're getting near the end of a series all about the Ten Commandments. To be completely honest, I wasn't too thrilled about getting to this week in particular. Obviously I think there are elements to each of the commandments that apply to all of our lives. I don't think they would be the "top 10" if it wasn't at least applicable across the board in some way. But, this week we are talking about the command to not steal.

When we were first talking through this series and we decided I would teach this week, I thought it would be mostly conceptual and I'd do my best to draw some personal connections based on experiences I've had in my life. But I really didn't think this week would feel all that personal to many of us in general. Then about 2 months ago, we had to fire one of our staff members for ongoingly stealing from our church. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, feel free to ask someone near you for more details, but suffice it to say, this one hits closer to home for us these days than I originally thought it would. So I'd love to pray for us real quick and we can jump in. **Pray.**

In case you missed it a second ago, the command for today comes from Deuteronomy chapter 5 verse 19. It says, "you shall not steal." The concept of stealing in general is pretty straightforward and most likely pretty well understood. Even people who steal often are pretty clear that they are in fact stealing. They're not going, "but what is stealing exactly? I see it more as involuntary reallocation of resources, metaphorically." But for our purposes today, I want to offer a general mindset that applies to stealing in all situations. I think at its core, **stealing says, "you lose so that I can gain."** It's this mentality that there's something I desire, or something I feel like I need that isn't mine, or something that I think will help me that doesn't belong to me, and I will do what I can to gain *that* thing regardless of how it impacts someone else. I'm fine with someone else losing it if it means I can gain it.

This is one of the commands that pretty much everyone agrees with on the surface. And I think a lot of that is because our first reaction is to think about being stolen *from* in some way. And that's something that makes *everyone* have a reflexive, almost *painful* response. But I think the concept of "stealing" actually plays out in a lot of different ways, and some of them might be a little surprising. We're going to dive into several of those in just a little bit. But before we do, I want to take everyone on a journey through time.

I want us all to look at the very first example we have of stealing taking place. And we don't have to look very far. You may not have actually known this is a story about

stealing, but it is. I'll have this on the screen so you don't have to turn there, but we're going to look at the beginning pages of Scripture in Genesis 1, 2, and 3. First look at Genesis 1:29:

29 Then God said, "I give you [Adam and Eve] **every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.**

God lets his creation know they are fully provided for. They will never want for food, they'll never need to wonder where the next meal is coming from, they have *everything* they need. God then reiterates his provision for them in chapter 2 and gives them one specific command in addition. Take a look, chapter 2:16-17:

16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; **17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.**"

God says, "I have given you everything you need, and not just that, I have given you a huge *abundance*. You will never want for anything, you will never be in need. But I'm commanding you *not* to eat from this singular tree in the midst of all the trees you could ever dream of." At the beginning of this series we actually talked about how since God is the only one who is able to determine good and evil, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil actually *belonged* to him. He said, "I give you all these things, but *that* tree is mine." And if you know the story, you know what happens next, but here's a quick reminder in 3:6:

6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, **she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.**

They had everything they needed, but they were deceived and tempted and they ended up believing the lie that God was holding out on them. So they decided they would be better off if they had something else that wasn't theirs to have, and they stole from God. This is the first time stealing takes place, but it is by no means the last.

And you don't have to look much further to find God's explicit command *against* stealing. Like I said just a minute ago, "you shall not steal" is a pretty straightforward command on the surface. While the scope or significance of the theft might change, a lot of us tend to think of stealing as taking something from another person or entity that wasn't yours to begin with. **Maybe it's as menial as a child taking a cool pencil from someone in their**

class because it seems better than the one they have, or maybe it's as big as an Ocean's Eleven style heist to take \$160 million from a casino owner. The concept is the same. I read one author who put it this way: "theft is practical idolatry."¹ Stealing is the practical outworking of our internal idolatries. It's when we get to the point of acting on whatever we've idolized in our hearts. If you remember back to the beginning of this series, we talked about how if you lie, or cheat, or steal, or break *any* of the commandments, it's ultimately because, at least in that moment, something has become more important to you than God. That's exactly what's happening when we end up stealing.

But I don't want us to think about it *too* narrowly. I would argue God's command against stealing is actually much broader than many of us tend to think. So I want to spend a little time unpacking a few ways this command actually applies to us. I'll hit several different ones, and there's certainly more than just these, but I think most of the different forms of stealing actually fall into two main categories. There is **stealing through greed**, and **stealing through laziness**.

Stealing through greed

Stealing through greed includes arguably the most obvious form of stealing. To me, it's the "classic" kind of stealing. It truly embodies the mindset of, "you lose so that I can gain." You have something, I want that thing, so I'm taking it from you. This would be blatant theft of items or money.

For example, for part of my time in college, I had what we'll call loose convictions in regards to large companies. There's too much there to unpack all of it, but here's what's relevant about that for today: one semester, I had a morning class three times per week. On the way to that class each day, I would pass an Einstein Brothers Bagels. They had a coffee bar where you could pick which coffee you wanted after you paid for your cup. I took my own cup with me to class, went to Einstein's when they were busy and had a long line, walked around the line to the coffee bar, and helped myself. I decided that company was in a position where they could afford to be stolen from far more easily than I could afford to buy coffee three days each week. I was basically a modern day Robin Hood taking from the rich to give to the poor. I wanted to gain something, and that meant they needed to lose something. But just because Robin Hood seems like he's a really cool guy doing awesome stuff for the poor, he's still stealing. That's a super obvious example, and I don't do that anymore for the record. But if you think critically about it, greed tends to be much sneakier than just walking up and snatching something.

¹ Peter Leithart, *The Ten Commandments*

In a few different spots in the Old Testament, we see the idea of stealing expanded on. It includes things like “inaccurate measurements” and “cheating through schemes.”² In biblical times, and in some parts of the world still today, merchants and vendors would use scales with physical weights to determine costs. They didn’t have digital scales like we do, so some people would take weights that looked like they were supposed to and make them lighter by carving out some of the inside. They were able to charge more for their goods because the measurement was inaccurate. That was a form of stealing that was prohibited. Today, that would look more like consciously overvaluing or overcharging for something because they may not know what a fair price is for whatever you’re selling.

There’s also passages that expand on the definition of stealing by prohibiting people from charging excessive interest on loans, and even some passages prohibiting charging *any* interest at all on certain people if it would cause them undue strain. There’s a passage in Deuteronomy 24 that specifically says not to take collateral for a loan from someone when all they have is the bare minimum to survive because it would be wrong to make them suffer as a result. Immediately after that we see a prohibition against underpaying employees and taking advantage of people who need work by giving them less than you should. All of those things are under the umbrella of stealing through greed. And you can see at the root of all of them is the mentality we talked about: you lose, I gain.

And it’s not just ancient practices, there are modern day equivalents of these things. Some are more obvious than others. If you’re in a position of hiring and paying employees, underpaying them to keep extra money for yourself falls into this category. Charging people astronomically high interest or using predatory variable interest rates on loans to make more profit from them falls into this category, like payday loan or title loan companies. So would any kind of dishonest business practice like false advertising. Marketing in a way that makes people believe whatever you’re selling does something it won’t actually do. They end up *not* getting what they think they’re paying for, now they’re out however much that thing cost even though they only bought it because they believed it would do something it *didn’t* do, and the other person ends up getting more money as a result. You lose, I gain.

This includes *overselling* people on things they don’t need. Going out of your way to try to convince people to buy or pay for something they don’t actually need just so you can make more money off of them. Which is pretty much exactly how modern advertising functions. **This one takes a little more clarification I think. Some people in this room work in advertising or sales. That is absolutely not an inherently bad field. There are people**

² Proverbs 20:23

here whose job is to convince people to pay for certain things, and there are certainly contexts where there's no problem with that. If your job requires you to sell something to people that they need and you're competing with another company or salesperson, it's not wrong to try to convince them to buy it from you as long as you aren't lying to them. Some people sell things they are passionate about and they truly believe other people's lives would be better if they had it. Go for it! The command against stealing, based on my understanding, does not prohibit you being passionate about something or doing your job well. So please keep on doing those things.

But I do think it prohibits what we talked about a second ago, false advertising, overselling on things people don't need, those kinds of things. And if you are in a workplace where you are pushed or even required to do some of those things, I think obedience to this command would be to exclude yourself from those practices. That might sound a bit extreme, but sometimes obedience does mean going against the current around you to the point where you need to get out to keep living obediently.

Another way stealing through greed plays out in our culture today in a way that mirrors Old Testament commands is through fraud. The two biggest areas would be insurance fraud and tax fraud. I read a recent study³ that said about 20% of people think it's completely fine to lie about smoking habits in order to pay less on health insurance, and about 25% of people think it's completely fine to lie about income to avoid paying taxes. Regardless of your personal opinions on taxes, we live in a country where there is federal income tax. And according to Scripture, intentionally avoiding it would fall under this command to not steal. Yes, the government has way more money than you or me, and they certainly don't always seem to use it in the ways we think they should, but again, the Robin Hood approach doesn't justify it.

Some of those may be relatable for you, but I acknowledge they're pretty specific examples. And I felt like I should save the most challenging one for last in this category. At least it's the most challenging one for me. Scripture would also include a lack of generosity in this category. A lack of generosity to the church for those who are a part of it and a lack of generosity to people in need. Malachi 3:8 says, **"Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me." But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' 'In tithes and offerings.'"** They were withholding tithes to the Lord and he called them out and said they were *robbing* him.

We also see instructions in Deuteronomy 24 that tells people to leave any extra crops in their fields and to *not* go back a second time to collect it. It says they're meant to leave it

³ <https://www.insurancejournal.com/news/national/2016/03/15/401919.htm>

so people who don't have enough can come take it for themselves. The extra *belongs* to the poor. In fact, according to Scripture, *everything* ultimately belongs to God, and whatever we have is just ours to us for his purposes. We are just stewards of the things God lets us have, so whenever we don't do what he says to do with it, we're essentially stealing from him.

And this one is so hard for me, and not because I dislike being generous or feel like I want to hoard all of my money. This one is tough for me because my sinful tendency is to think of generosity as a badge of honor or an action that deserves praise. I don't want to think of it as something that I *need to* do, I want to think of it as something I can pat myself on the back for doing. And I certainly don't want to think of *not* doing it as stealing. Deep down, I want credit for doing it. Which if we're honest is just another form of stealing by trying to take some of the glory that's due to God.

I know there's plenty more examples I could list in this category, but for the sake of time let's move on. The second category is...

Stealing through laziness

Let me tell you, I would *love* to not talk about this. Other than my coffee larceny days, I tend to think I do decently well with not stealing stuff in my day to day life. But this one requires a lot more self-reflection and honesty. Obviously I can't speak for everyone, but this is one I see a ton in my generation in a few different ways. One big one is what's known as "time theft." Time theft is essentially doing anything other than work-related stuff while you're working. Basically getting paid to not do your job, whatever that other thing is.

I am *not* saying you shouldn't take breaks at work, I'm *not* saying you should work yourself to death, I'm *not* saying you should sacrifice your sanity and humanity for the sake of the corporate machine in which you find yourself a cog. But if you're actively looking for ways to "kill time" or "work the system" to do as little actual work as possible and still get paid, that *is theft*. Not to mention it misses a lot about what the *purpose* of work is for a follower of Jesus. For us, work is not just a place we show up and collect a paycheck; it's part of how we partner with God to do something he *made* us to do. We did a whole series on that in the summer of 2020⁴, you should listen to it, but I don't have time to dive into it now.

In the same vein, I think this would also include doing just the bare minimum to get by without getting fired. Like I just said, this doesn't mean breaking your neck over doing

⁴ <https://citychurchknox.com/series/work-gods-purpose-in-our-labors>

anything and everything. But if followers of Jesus are called to live in a way that puts Jesus on display, I don't know that I could come up with a very convincing argument as to how we could justify not being a helpful and reliable presence at our workplace. I don't think anyone can or should do *everything* for *everyone* at their job. But I do think there are most likely things that everyone could do to go above and beyond to be helpful at their job. I do think there are things you could be part of improving at your job. I know someone who got a job and they had to wait on a very long process to get security clearance in order to start doing what they were hired to do. They still showed up and still got paid, but until that clearance was processed, they were essentially just sitting around. And it rubbed them the wrong way. They felt like they were wasting the company's time. So they went to their boss and said, "I know I can't do what I was hired to do yet, but I'm just sitting around. There's 4 janitorial closets in our office and they seem to be a mess. I'd like to organize them." So that's what they did. They weren't just being an overachiever, they felt a responsibility to be productive as a follower of Jesus because they were being paid to be there and didn't want to just take money.

And I understand there are some jobs where you are told there really isn't anything you can work on to be productive. I know people whose bosses have told them to just bring a book or some headphones until "work" shows up to do. But maybe instead of just scrolling Tiktok or watching Breaking Bad for the 5th time, you can read a book about Jesus or listen to a sermon or podcast about following Jesus more deeply with your life.

Being a follower of Jesus should impact every aspect of your life. If being a follower of Jesus means the core of who you are is changed and the goal of your life is to make him known and become more like him in the process, then your place of work is not exempt from that reality in your life. In fact, based on the fact that we spend so much of our lives working, your place of work is actually one of the *primary* places that should play out.

So in the grand scheme of things, how do we faithfully follow the command to not steal? I don't think the solution is just avoidance. I don't think Jesus just wants us to stop short of stealing. I think he actually wants us to figure out how to live in a way that embodies the polar opposite posture from that of a thief. At the core, I think the solution is...

Contentment and generosity

If stealing is one practical outworking of idolatry, then the solution needs to start with realigning our affection and identity in Jesus. That's where contentment as followers of Jesus comes from. And we look to Jesus as our example in this as well. Not only did Jesus *never* take anything that didn't belong to him, he gave up everything that was rightfully his for our sake.

We are invited into such a beautiful way of living. But generosity from a position of true contentment is such a difficult concept for many of us in America. I mentioned this earlier, but discontentment is the very air we breathe here. We are constantly being disciplined in discontentment. You need bigger, better, newer, flashier, on and on and on. You *need* these things in order to matter. If that's what we believe, of course we'll do whatever it takes to get it. We'll take anything from anyone if it means we can finally have meaning.

That might be the gospel of Wall Street, but it's not the gospel of Jesus. The gospel of Jesus says the God of the universe looks at you and sees a precious daughter or son. Jesus says, "I have accomplished everything on your behalf to stand before the Father and be called righteous." And Jesus invites us to follow in his footsteps in that generosity.

As followers of Jesus, everything about our lives is infused with purpose. Through the way we live our lives, we put Jesus *himself* on display to the world around us. All of our giftings, all our abilities, all our possessions are now tools for us to use to make him known. And while not everyone is called to give everything away, **as Jesus' followers we are certainly called to use everything to bless others.** We see this in places like 2 Corinthians 9:11: "You will be enriched in every way **so that you can be generous on every occasion,** and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."

We talk about the idea of generosity every now and then here, but it's truly a pillar of Christian community, and it has been since the time of the early church. In the first pages of Acts when we see descriptions of how the church functioned, one of the recurring themes is providing financially for each other. Acts 2:44-47 says, "**44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.**"

Generosity was their whole way of life. No one was in need because everyone was providing for each other. They had "glad and sincere hearts." They weren't envious of each other's possessions or status. They didn't need to be motivated by greed or laziness because they were constantly giving and receiving together. It's such a beautiful picture of the realities of the cross being lived out. And I believe it is the main way we can fight against the temptation to steer away from the command to not steal. **R. Kent Hughes** is a pastor and author and he put it like this: "**Perpetual generosity is a perpetual de-deification of money.**" That's exactly what we need. We need a "de-deification of

money.” We need realigned priorities and contentment in our identity that was secured by Jesus’ work on the cross.

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As we begin to wrap up today, I want to end things a little differently than we normally do.. So instead of a list of specific habits and practicals, I’ll leave those primarily as contentment and generosity. I truly think those are absolutely essential in this. But I want to spend the last part of our time just pleading with you a bit. This may not be the general consensus, but I can’t help but think at least a large portion of you hearing this might respond to the command to not steal like this: “sounds good. I’m not really stealing, and I don’t really plan on it.” And I think one of the most dangerous places to be is thinking that you don’t need to be on guard. One of the cleverest tools the enemy uses is convincing you that you’re above a certain temptation, and that it would never happen to you. But like I mentioned at the beginning, this week’s teaching went from theoretical to deeply personal pretty quickly because of recent events.

And here’s the thing: it takes 1,000 tiny decisions to get you to the place where you make the one *big* decision. No one really just wakes up one day and says, “you know what, today I’m stealing from my brother.” It’s a long road to get there. ***And it can happen to anyone.*** The things we view as a source of comfort and value in our lives will ultimately shape us into the kind of people that will do whatever it takes to secure them.

If you don’t believe me, maybe you’ll believe Jesus. I’ll put these passages on the screen, but look with me at Matthew 6: ***24 “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.*** This was during Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. He’s speaking to a large gathered crowd with his disciples.

And a few chapters later, in the same account of Jesus’ life, one of those twelve disciples, one of the twelve people closest to Jesus, one of the twelve people who lived and ate and ministered with *God in the flesh* every day, took 30 pieces of silver in exchange for Jesus’ life. Loving money and comfort to the point of selling your *savior* doesn’t happen overnight, and it certainly doesn’t just happen to people who are far from God.

Judas was an interesting character for many reasons, but there’s something in particular about him that stands out. There’s a story in the book of John where a woman comes to Jesus and pours a bottle of perfume on his feet and wipes them clean with her hair in an act of humility and worship. And Judas gets *mad* about it. He said he was angry because of how expensive it was and how many poor people could have been helped with the

money. Then John gives us a little more insight into Judas' heart in [John 12:6](#): "He [Judas] did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it."

Jesus was not surprised by Judas' love of money and the road it would take him down. When Jesus gave that message we just read, Judas was sitting right there with him, and Jesus knew that he would watch what we said in verse 24 play out in front of his eyes through one of his closest friends. "You cannot serve both God and money."

Jesus wasn't surprised, but more importantly he wasn't defeated. The actions of a thief couldn't overshadow the generosity of our Savior. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection embody the exact opposite of stealing. Stealing says, "you lose so that I can gain," but Jesus said, "I'm going to lose *everything* so you all can gain." Jesus gave up everything so we could be restored to right relationship with God.

But what God is accomplishing doesn't stop at the cross. God is working and moving in unbelievably powerful ways today despite the realities of theft. We as a church have experienced those realities recently. And if I'm completely honest with you all, I have seen Jesus' character embodied here in some incredible ways as a result. I have seen grace and compassion shown when pain was caused, I have seen love put on display in the ways people are interacting with each other, I have seen people wrestle with the realities of sin and the damage that it causes and growth in understanding of why confession and repentance are so unbelievably important, I have seen people turn to and rely on God's strength because they've realized they can't sustain themselves. God is doing things here in our church and in us to align us more with himself as a result of *being stolen from* that will have a massive impact for years to come. The gospel offers hope for the thief and for those who have been stolen from because God is the focus. I read one author who put it this way: "our Father can easily out-give what any thief can steal."

Communion