

The 8th Commandment

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I mentioned, we are continuing our study on the Ten Commandments this evening, and as you know, as we work our way through these commandments, we are using a fairly simple and straightforward framework for our analysis. We are asking three questions.

What is the command saying? How do we put it into practice? And why would God give us this command? What, how and why? And tonight, as we said, is the turn of the eighth commandment, which we find in Deuteronomy 5 verse 19, and you shall not steal. Well, we start by asking the question, what is this commandment saying? And again, it's a very simple commandment.

It's only four to five words long, a very clear prohibition against theft. Do not steal. And we can immediately say from that that two key principles lie behind this commandment.

First of all, it tells us that we have to take care in terms of how we conduct ourselves in regard to other people's property. We must be careful that we do not take other people's possessions away. And this command is therefore emphasising the fact that individuals and family have a right to own their properties. In the biblical picture, having your own possessions is not wrong. In fact, it is right. This is emphasising the right to ownership that we all possess. So firstly, we have to take care about other people's property. But secondly, this command is also emphasising that we have to be careful how we conduct ourselves in regard to our own possessions. Because the command is telling us that whatever we have, or whatever we gain, must not be the result of dishonest behaviour. Because when you think about it, theft has a twofold effect. It does two things. It means that the victim is unfairly impoverished, and it means that the thief is unjustly enriched. The Bible tells us that both of these are forbidden. So as we said, it's not saying that it's wrong to have possessions.

It's not even saying that it is wrong to have a lot of possessions. It's not saying that it is wrong to be wealthy. But it is highlighting the fact that God expects us all to respect the property rights of other people, and he forgives us from furthering our own wealth through dishonest means or deceptive behaviour. And as always, the Catechism brilliantly sums up what the key emphasis of this commandment is. Question 74 and 75 of the shorter Catechism are really helpful. What is required in the eighth commandment? The eighth commandment requires the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others. That's what we've been saying, what we do get must be done in a lawful way.

[3 : 20] What is forbidden in the eighth commandment? The eighth commandment forbids whatsoever doth or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbour's wealth or outward estate. We've got to be careful about how we handle other people's property. We've got to be careful about how we further our own property. And in many ways, behind this commandment lie many of the key biblical principles of morality. When you go through the Bible again and again and again, we see the instructions to be honest, to be unselfish, to be kind, to be respectful and above all to love our neighbour. And all of these things, all of these ethical instructions that the Bible repeatedly gives us lie behind the principles of this commandment that you shall not steal. And Paul emphasises that in Romans chapter 13, verse 9 to 10, all for the commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet. And any other commandment are summed up in this word, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbour. Therefore, love is fulfilling, is the fulfilling of the law. And so we are loving our neighbour when we make sure that we are careful in regard to their property and to our property. And alongside that, this command also reminds us of a point that I keep emphasising, but I will always keep emphasising because it's an incredibly important point and it's the fact that God thinks of his people in terms of community. People very, very often think individualist, individualistically, if that's a word. Certainly in our society, people are very individually focused. We think about my rights, my thoughts, my goals, my dreams, my stuff, my time. People are very, very individualistically minded. And even in terms of our faith, we can be very individualistic because we can so easily say, it's between me and God, nobody else comes into it. It's what I believe and it's my relationship. And of course, that is partly true because we must have a personal faith, but that faith that we must individually have makes us part of a community, a community of believers, a community that is a family, a community that is one church. And God in the Ten Commandments is giving community instructions, not just individual instructions, community instructions, and he wants his people to be characterised by a mutual responsibility towards one another. And that still applies. We must not just come here and think of ourselves and our relationship with God. We come here as a church, as a family, as a people, and God looks at us first and foremost as a collective group and we are to think and act accordingly. The commandment not to steal is a key element of that community thinking, the fact that God is not drawing persons, he's drawing a people, a collective people that we are all part of. So that's the first principle really that lie behind it. That we have to be careful about how we handle other people's stuff, we have to be careful about how we further our own stuff. So if that's the basic principles, how then do we build on that and how do we put this into practice in terms of our real life conduct?

Well the fascinating thing about the command do not steal is that the Bible, like with all the other commandments, has a very, very wide understanding of what keeping this commandment involves. Although the commandments are quite short and sometimes they're quite specific, the application of all of these commandments, as we've seen from Do Not Murder, Do Not Commit Adultery, Honor Your Father and Mother, they all have very broad implications. And I think we can say that the Bible identifies four categories of behaviour that would be outlawed by this commandment. And some are obvious, but some are maybe not so obvious, but all of them are biblical. So we're going to identify, in asking the question, how do we put into practice, we're identifying four ways in which this command must be put into effect, or the way this command could be broken. The first of these is stealing by force. We read in

Exodus 22, if a man steals an ox or a sheep and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep. This is the kind of thing that I immediately think of when we refer to the Eighth commandment. When you say, do not steal, you imagine somebody robbing a bank or stealing a car or in the Old Testament context going and swiping some animals from somebody else, forcefully entering, forcefully removing and taking something that does not belong to them. And obviously that is wrong. The Bible outlaws stealing by force.

That's the obvious one. And that's the one that I'm quite sure none of us have ever been guilty of. I certainly hope that we haven't. But there are three other ways in which we can steal according to scripture. The second way that we can slip into this breaking this command is stealing by neglect. And this is a very interesting point that emerges from the passage that we read in Exodus 22. You can see verse 14 there. If a man borrows anything of his neighbor and it is injured or dies, the owner not being with it, he shall make full restitution. If the owner was with it, he shall not make restitution. If it was hired, it came for its hiring fee. Basically that is saying that if we are looking after somebody else's property, if he borrows something, you've got to be very, very careful. And if you are careless, in other words, what this verse is, if you are not with the animal, in other words, if you've just left it and abandoned it, in that situation, if it gets lost, if it gets killed, then we are responsible for that loss. Same emphasis is made in verse five of the same chapter. If a man pauses a field or a vineyard to be grazed over, imagine somebody just lets their sheep go all the way through a vineyard or lets his beast loose and it feeds on another man's field, he shall make restitution from the best in his own field and in his own vineyard. Again, carelessness, neglect is breaking this commandment because that kind of neglect can lead to the result of somebody else's loss. It should make us all the more careful that any of our own animals don't go and eat their way through somebody's garden or anything like that. Emphasising that we must be careful. And the key point is that God expects us to take our responsibilities seriously. I don't know about you, but sometimes it's very, very tempting if you borrow something to be that little bit more careless with it.

Maybe if you go to McKinnon's and hire a tool, you can sometimes see it and it looks pretty hammered because the temptation is to think, well, it's not mine, I can just, I can be rough with it. And very often you see these tools that go out on hire have had a hard life because they tend to be neglected. If we borrow something, we must take care to return it as we found it. Many a house gets rented out and you people move into this nice house and then when the time they come to move out, the place is wrecked. Carpet stained, wall scuffed and damaged, various items missing or not working. In God's eyes, that is stealing.

[12:15] And that's something that we must bathe in mind. So we can easily steal by neglect. Bible makes that very clear. The third way in which we can break this commandment is stealing by deception. And the Bible is emphasising here that theft can be much more subtle than the kind of bank robber type stealing that would just walk up to somebody, whatever, that weapon or something and demand money or demand a car or anything like that. Theft can be much more subtle and much more deceptive than that. It's an absolutely fascinating verse in Leviticus chapter 19 verse 35. It says here, you shall do no wrong in judgement, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, at just lfa and at just him. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of

Egypt. That's really, really interesting because it's talking about measuring out stuff. You imagine a scale where you're pouring out grain and somebody maybe says I want to buy an lfa of grain. I can't remember exactly how much that is. But it's emphasising that what you say weighs a certain amount to put into today's language. If you said I want to buy 10 kilos, God is saying that has got to be 10 kilos. It has got to be an exact and a true measurement. God prohibits any deception in terms of weights and measures.

And of course the point that that is making is that this commandment applies to all areas of life because this is an area where it is much, much more easy for us to fall into the trap of breaking this commandment. If you are selling something, it is so easy and so tempting to ask for more than what it's worth or if you're trying to buy something, it's very, very easy to do your best to get away with paying less than what it's worth or sometimes it's very easy to be dishonest in your dealings. And remember when we were changing our car, I recently got a new car, a Ford Focus and the car I had before that was a Vauxhall Corsa that as everybody knows kept on breaking down. And I phoned to trade it in and I was speaking to the guy on the phone who was going to buy the new car off and I said how much would I get for the Corsa and he said oh well it's pretty good is it?

And I almost paused because part of me wanted to say oh yeah, yeah but I thought no I can't say that I said to be honest no it's awful. I said that's why I'm getting rid of it. I thought I can't say it's good because it wasn't. But the temptation was there, so easy to say oh yeah the Corsa's great but had I done that I would have been breaking this commandment.

On a much bigger scale you've got the whole Volkswagen emission scandal whereby they're making out that a car has a certain performance level of emissions therefore making the car qualify for all sorts of tax reliefs and making it all the more desirable for people to buy.

[15 : 50] And of course it's since been discovered that the whole thing is a big scam. When the car gets plugged in to the diagnostic equipment there's a special programme that lowers the emissions rate so that the test results look better than they actually are. And I'm sure you can all think of millions of examples where this sort of thing can happen. God is making clear that his expectations are high in this area and I don't think any of us struggle with a temptation to rob a bank. But I'm sure like me you all struggle with a temptation to think I could withhold a bit of information here, I could pay a bit less there, I could ask for a bit more there. God is saying that we must not do it. Leviticus 19:11 emphasises it. It says you shall not steal, you shall not deal falsely. And very often the Hebrew text works in what we call parallelisms where it will sort of say the same thing twice in two slightly different ways. So it's saying if you're dealing falsely with people that's stealing. Do not do it. Do not steal. Do not deal falsely with one another. You shall not lie to one another. We must not steal by deception. The fourth way that the Bible emphasises that this command applies is that it tells us that we can steal by withholding.

We can steal by withholding. Normally when you think of stealing you think of grabbing. Grabbing a car from somebody or grabbing whatever, grabbing some turnips out of the neighbour's garden. You think of grabbing stuff, taking something to yourself. But the Bible also makes clear that we can steal by holding on to something that we shouldn't. Leviticus 19 again verse 13, you shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. And Paul repeats the emphasis in Romans 13 again verse 7, pay to all what is owed to them. Taxes to whom taxes are owed.

Revenue to whom revenue is owed. Respect to whom respect is owed. Honour to whom honour is owed. Sometimes again the temptation to hold back can be strong but God is saying he does not allow that. If somebody withholds what they owe to somebody else whether that's wages or taxes or a payment of any kind then again we are breaking this commandment. And this is emphasising what we were saying at the start how we don't just have to be careful about what we do with other people's property, we have to be careful about what we do with our own property. Because this is emphasising that not only must we make sure that we don't gain our wealth by theft, we must make sure that we don't maintain our wealth by theft.

Sometimes you know you might have done well and you might have a good bank balance and then you realise you've got to pay a tax bill or something at the end of the year and it can be so easy to think oh I want to keep that but God is saying do not withhold. But in this area we come to an even more serious point because the Bible doesn't just say that we can steal in terms of wages or taxes. The Bible also tells us that we can actually steal from God and we can steal from God if we withhold what should be given to him. And this of course is where we come to the principle of tithing. God in his word makes clear that he asks for us to tithe, tithing means to give a tenth and so God asks us that a tenth of our income should be given to him and the way in which we give to him is by giving to the church.

Leviticus 27 verse 30, every tithe of the land, whether of the seed or of the land or of the food of the trees is the Lord. So every tenth of the land, tenth of what you grow or tenth of what you harvest, it's the Lord's. It is holy to the Lord. Now obviously tithing is a topic that we don't mention very often and it's a sensitive topic because as a church we never want to give the impression that we are asking for people's money and we are not asking for people's money. All we are trying to do is see exactly what the Bible says and to present that clearly to people. And when it comes to tithing there's a crucial statement in the prophecy of Malachi which challenges us all. Will man rob God?

[21 : 14] Yet you are robbing me. But you say how have we robbed you? How could you rob God? And then the answer is given. In your tithes and contributions you are cursed with a curse for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. That's of course very challenging and it's very interesting that that verse does not say you are robbing me by not tithing but rather that their tithing is not what it should be. And so we see that we are, well the scripture is saying it, I'm not saying it, the Bible is saying it, we are robbing God if we withhold our tithe. And tithing is a very fair thing because it is simply a tenth of our income. And that means that the amount that we give is always proportional to what we have. Everybody gets to keep 90%. And if your 100% is a small amount then your tithe will be a small amount. If your 100% is a vast amount your tithe will be a vast amount but God will always allow us to keep 90% of what is ours. However, God does ask for a tenth. And this is an important point because when we get a request for payment from the tax office we do not withhold what they ask for. Whatever the amount is we give it. When we get a bill from a mobile phone or our broadband provider at the end of each month we don't withhold what they ask for. If your phone bill is £30 a month you don't send 24 to Vodafone. We give them what they ask. When we go to the checkout at Tesco if it comes to £132 then we don't give them £40. We give what people ask. And if that's true then surely we cannot withhold from God what he asks. Now as I said this is an area where it's inevitable not to feel a bit awkward and it's a bit sensitive but I want to emphasise that so many of you are incredibly, incredibly generous to the church and I cannot thank enough you all for the contributions that you do make. But I do simply want to just remind you all of the principle of tithing. Simply for the reason that it is a biblical principle. And if you're anything like me you are incredibly forgetful when it comes to anything like that. And so I can certainly recommend a standing order because then you don't forget because the bank remembers for you. But that's up to everybody else. But what I do want to emphasise is the next verse in Malachi. These verses say will you rob

God by holding back? But look what it says in verse 10, bring the full tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there's no more need. God is saying if you give to me what I ask I will bless you. I will bless you abundantly. And those words there are utterly remarkable. He says God says put me to the test. Now in most areas we are to never put God to the test except when he asks us to. And here he asks us to. So if you are thinking about tithing just say to God well okay. You're asking me to put you to the test. I will put you to the test. God is emphasising the fact that if we honour him he will honour us. A wonderful version of the Proverbs 11-24. One freely gives, one person freely gives, yet grows all the richer. Another withholds what he should give and only suffer want. That's the principle that God is laying. The hand that gives is the one that is blessed. It's more blessed to give than to receive. And that's because if we give we are very often blessed. And I have to say that as a decon's court we are incredibly encouraged because it's quite amazing really. We contribute as much as we can to the mission work of the church. And there's a missions board fund. The way it works in the free church is that each congregation has a missions levy which is what we're supposed to pay according to our income. And then there's a mission fund which we can contribute to additional amounts that we give. And the decon's court here, long before I came, has been incredibly generous to the missions fund and has given a very large amount in proportion to the income of this church. Which is a wonderful wonderful thing and I'm saying that not to commend me but to commend you. But you know what the amazing thing is? We have recently put up our contribution to the missions fund by 20% and do you know that our bank balance is the highest that it's been since I came here?

What God says is true. We give and we grow all the richer. And please when you think about this remember that when you give to the church you are creating opportunities for the gospel. If you give to the church of your resources, of your finances, you are opening up possibilities. You are putting church plants into our cities. You are putting ministers into our vacant congregations. You are putting missionaries out into the world. You are putting youth workers into presbyteries. You are putting teachers into our seminary. You are doing amazing gospel work by contributing to our church. And so it's something that is just a great thing and it's well worth doing. So all of these categories, stealing by force, stealing by neglect, stealing by deception, stealing by withholding show us that God has a wide ranging view of what it means to steal and God wants us to live lives where we do not fall into any of these categories. And of course all of this is highlighting the fact that if stealing is prohibited, God wants us to live at the complete opposite end of the spectrum. He wants our lives to be characterised by generosity. If we are Christians, the default position is generous. Jesus highlights this in the Sermon on the Mount Matthew 5.38. You have heard it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go two miles. Give to the one who begs from you and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. Likewise Matthew 6 verse 19. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Selfishness is prohibited in the kingdom of God. Jesus wants us to be generous. At the heart of theft lies self-interest, individualistic thinking. The basic motivation of theft is I want more. But at the heart of the kingdom of God is a community solidarity where we live by Jesus' words whatever you wish that others would do to you do also to them. For this is the law and the prophets. Stealing arises from the thinking that our own wealth should be furthered by somebody else's loss. But God wants us to be the opposite.

We are to give and enrich others by willingly sacrificing a portion of our own wealth. The kingdom of God is a place of generosity. That's why it's not just enough to say I don't steal but I just look after my own interests. Kingdom of God is where we think of others interests where we share, where we give, where we are as far in the opposite direction of stealing as we can possibly possibly be. So that's a few of the practical implications of this commandment. But I want us to finish off by coming to our third question. Why? Why would God give this command? In many ways the answers are obvious. As we've said, a respect for one another's property seems to be a fairly basic ethical principle. But as with all of the other commandments, this commandment and all the practical implications that arise out of it are derived from key theological doctrines. We'll always say and we'll keep on saying that our actions are to be shaped by our theology. The way God wants us to live is an outworking of the nature of God himself. And I want us to just say three things briefly in this regard. The first theological point that lies behind this command is the fact that God is sovereign. God is sovereign. Now that's something that we say all the time.

God is sovereign, he's in command, he's king. But that is real and it has real implications in our lives and that means that everything that we have, everything that you have in your lives, in your home, in your bank account is only there because God has given it to you. Every good and every perfect gift is from above. Coming down from the Father of Lights with whom there's no variation or shadow due to change. God is the one who gives you what you have. Now if you're poor, if you're well off, whatever your circumstances, it is all an outworking of God's sovereignty. And God has promised that he will provide for our needs and that's why Jesus told us not to worry about our possessions. Do not be anxious saying what will we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear for the Gentiles seek after all these things. And your Heavenly Father knows that you need them all but seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you. Again that's a verse that we know so well but yet it is so hard to put into practice in our lives because we're so often anxious, so often worried, so often thinking I need this, I need that, I can't afford this, I can't afford that. What if this happens, what if that happens? God says don't be anxious. I am in control. And so if we firmly hold to the truth of God's sovereignty then we will be content. And theft usually arises from a lack of contentment. You think I want this, I want that, oh I'm going to just steal it. But if we seek after contentment, if we actively pursue it then we will be in a far better position to avoid these temptations. But contentment doesn't come from what we have. Contentment comes from how we think. Contentment does not come from what your possessions are. Contentment comes from your attitude. Paul writes about this in 1 Timothy.

[34 : 34] Godliness with contentment is great gain for we brought nothing into the world and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, to have snare into many senseless and harmless desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. Isn't that incredibly true? We can all think of examples in the world and the news where people have fallen into senseless and harmless, harmful, because of senseless and harmless, harmful desires they've fallen into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. It's through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pangs. If we constantly remind ourselves that God is sovereign, if you look at your bank account, maybe it's read, maybe it's got loads of zeros after the number in the bank balance. Whatever. If we remember that God is sovereign, we will be content. Secondly, we are reminded that God is righteous. Just like with the 6th and the 7th commandments, do not murder, do not commit adultery, theft is prohibited because it goes against everything that God stands for. God is righteous. Isaiah 61.8 says,

For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrong. God hates theft because he is a righteous God. And that is such a comfort and such a social peace for us all. God is righteous.

God is just. God is upright. God is true because I don't know about you, but I am finding that the older I get, the more disillusioned I become by the fact that our world is full of corruption. Corruption is everywhere. Even sport, you look at FIFA and the IAAF, corrupt to the very top, corruption everywhere. And I don't know if as you get older you get more suspicious, but everything you look at, you look at government policies, you look at how the news is reported and you think, is this the whole story? What's going on in the background? Corruption can seem to be such a source of worry and frustration in our lives, but thanks be to God that he is righteous. There is no corruption in God, no deception in God, no falseness in God. He is righteous. He is true. He does not deal corruptly. And when we teach our children basic truths, not to steal, not to, not to hit their friends, not to be selfish, we are simply teaching them godliness. We're teaching them to live in a way that is according to God's nature. We all know that certain things are right and wrong, and that's simply because we are made in the image of a righteous

God. And again, as we said a moment ago, God expects us to keep this commandment in every area of our lives because God is who he is. Remember that wonderful version of Leviticus 19:36, you shall have just balances, just weights, a just ifa, and a just hymn, I am the Lord, your God. We are to deal honestly with everyone because God is who he is. God is righteous in every ounce of his being. And that means that we are to keep this commandment in every detail of our lives. So behind this commandment lies the fundamental truth that God is sovereign and the fundamental truth that God is righteous. But thoroughly and finally and perhaps even most wonderfully of all, God gives us this command because God is gracious. God opposes theft because theft is the complete opposite of what the gospel is all about. We are saved because God is gracious. We have hope because God is generous.

We read about that at the very start of our service. God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places with Christ Jesus so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. You imagine how rich God is if you were to use such an image. If you were to say how rich is God, you would think of him with just mountains and mountains and mountains of money because God is sovereign, God is in charge and if you were to picture in your head like a child the riches of God, you would imagine him with just a mountain of money in front of him. This verse is telling us that God takes all of these riches and he pours them out on you. God is graciously sharing his immeasurable riches with you through Jesus

[40 : 31] Christ. At the heart of the Gospel, at the heart of God's being is the fact that he is gracious and that simply means that grace simply means to give at your own expense for the benefit of another. Grace means giving at your own expense for the benefit of another.

Theft is to take for your own benefit at the expense of another. The Gospel is the opposite.

The Gospel is the complete opposite of theft because it is a Gospel of grace. God has willingly given of himself. In fact, he gave himself, he gave his own son, he committed himself to a work that came at the greatest cost and all of that was so that he could freely give salvation to you and to everyone who comes to him. God has paid the price, God has eliminated the debt, God has met the full obligation, God has sent his own son and all of the riches of salvation in Jesus Christ can be yours. They can be yours tonight. It's not something you have to earn. It is a completely free gift. Sometimes you imagine a situation where you are in a story or a film or something and you see people standing before a vast land or a beautiful palace or all sorts of wonderful things and people will say, all this can be yours. Well, the greatest riches that anybody could have, the greatest riches that you can have in your life is to know Jesus Christ, to be a child of God, to be held in God's arms forevermore, to be his precious son or daughter and to have a place with him in heaven for all eternity. That is the greatest treasure that anybody could ever, ever have with all fear, all sorrow, all pain is promised to be taken away and

God is saying to you, all of this can be yours. It can be yours as a gift. God is a God who hates stealing because he is a God who loves giving and God will give all the riches of salvation in Jesus Christ to you if you simply ask. God loves to give. Amen. Let us pray.