

“THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT: THE PRESERVATION OF PROPERTY”

I. Introduction

- A. I sometimes enjoy watching movies in which the plot revolves around some kind of a heist or a well-planned burglary.
1. In many of these movies, the viewer sympathizes with the thieves because it seems like they are going after something that is rightfully theirs.
 2. The same attitude can be present in real life.
 3. We can almost hear that line of thinking in the minds of our first parents when they were tempted to take the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
 4. Perhaps they thought, ‘Why is God being so restrictive?’
 5. This fruit certainly looks good to me.
 6. I’m sure it would be very tasty.
 7. Furthermore, this nice serpent tells me that if I eat it, I will become wise, like God himself.
 8. Why would God want to deny me of this?
 9. Don’t I have a right to be happy?’
- B. You may not think that the eighth commandment is that much of a problem for you.
1. You may think, ‘I’ve never shoplifted, or cheated on my taxes or my expense account, or held someone up at gunpoint and said “Your money or your life.”’

2. You may think that this is one sin that is not too much of a temptation for you.
3. But if you think that way, you are wrong.
4. Each and every one of us struggles, in one way or another, with the temptation to take what is not rightfully ours and to withhold what we owe to others.
5. And each and every one of us has all sorts of ways of justifying the sins that we commit in this area.

II. What the Eighth Commandment Requires and Forbids

- A. We all have a pretty good sense of what stealing is.
 1. Stealing is taking something that is not yours without the permission of the person to whom it belongs.
 2. It is seeking to gain something for yourself that isn't rightfully yours.
 3. Our Shorter Catechism sums up the eighth commandment by saying that it requires "the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others" and that it forbids "whatsoever doth, or may, unjustly hinder our own, or our neighbor's, wealth or outward estate." [WSC 74-75]
 4. By giving us this commandment, the Lord is telling us that there is such a thing as the right of private ownership.
 5. Stealing would not be possible in a strictly communal society.
 6. The fact that it is possible means that God intends for people to be able to possess and keep the things that are rightfully theirs.
 7. As Zacharius Ursinus explains in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, "*The end or design of this commandment is, the*

preservation of the property or possessions which God has given to every one for the support of life: for if it is not lawful or becoming for us to steal, it is necessary that every man should possess that which lawfully belongs to him."

- B. Stealing is not merely a sin against other people.
 - 1. It is also a sin against God.
 - 2. God owns everything and he distributes it as he pleases.
 - 3. As David says to God in 1 Chronicles 29, "all things come from you, and of your own have we given you... all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own."
 - 4. God makes people stewards of the things that he providentially gives to them.
 - 5. He commands us to faithfully manage the things that he puts in our hands and to protect the things that he puts in the hands of our neighbor.
- C. Stealing displays a lack of trust in the Lord's provision.
 - 1. When a person takes something that is not rightfully his, he is saying that he doesn't believe that God will meet his needs.
 - 2. He is not content to do what God calls him to do and to trust that the Lord will care for him.
 - 3. He thinks that he needs to take matters into his own hands.
- D. Stealing also displays a lack of fear of God.
 - 1. The thief thinks that he can get away with stealing as long as he keeps it secret.

2. He forgets that his actions cannot be hidden from the eyes of the living God.
 3. This reminds me of something that I have been noticing when I take our puppy for a walk first thing in the morning.
 4. He has cultivated a taste for acorns, sticks, leaves, those little wood chips that people use for landscaping, and just about anything else that he can get into his mouth.
 5. Of course, these things are not part of a puppy's balanced diet, so we have to pry his jaws open and fish them out whenever he gets them.
 6. Lately, he has gotten pretty good at snatching things up from the sidewalk without even breaking his stride.
 7. He thinks that he can get away with it because he thinks that I don't see him.
 8. Now, it is one thing for a puppy to think that it can hide something from a guy who hasn't had his morning cup of coffee, but it is something else entirely for a human being to think that he can keep something hidden from God.
 9. God sees everything.
 10. We can hide things from other people, but there is nothing that we can hide from God.
- E. There are many ways in which we can break the eighth commandment.
1. We break it whenever we take things from others by force, by deception, or by pilfering.
 2. We break it whenever we cheat or manipulate or use flattery to get what we want out of people.

3. We break it whenever we take the credit for somebody else's work.
 4. We break it when we are greedy or slothful.
 5. We break it when we squander God's gifts, or when we try to obtain wealth through gambling or playing the lottery.
 6. We break it when we accumulate debt by living beyond our means and have no plan to pay it off.
- F. The eighth commandment extends beyond what we typically think of as theft.
1. Romans 13:7 commands us to "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, honor to whom honor is owed."
 2. Whenever we fail to pay others what we owe them in any area, we are breaking the eighth commandment.
 3. This applies to God as well as to people.
 4. God calls us to honor him in everything that we do.
 5. Whenever we fail to do that, we are robbing God of his honor.
 6. In the book of Malachi, God even tells Israel that they are robbing him when they withhold their tithes from him. (Mal. 3:8)
 7. I hope that you can see that if you make a thorough examination of your conscience, you will find many ways in which you have broken this portion of God's holy law.

III. The Eighth Commandment and Christ

- A. When we understand the scope of God's commandments, we are driven outside of ourselves to Jesus Christ.

1. While we fail to keep the eighth commandment in many ways, Jesus fulfilled it in every respect.
 2. He never took what did not belong to him.
 3. He always paid what he owed.
 4. He fulfilled all of his obligations, both toward other people and toward God.
- B. We find a good example of Jesus' fulfillment of this commandment in the account of his temptation by Satan in Matthew 4.
1. Satan tempted Jesus to use his power to turn stones into bread.
 2. This was a very real temptation for Jesus.
 3. He had been fasting for forty days and forty nights.
 4. He was hungry.
 5. We might wonder why it would have been wrong for Jesus to make himself some bread out of those stones.
 6. But Jesus knew that it would be wrong because it would have kept him from rendering to the Father the honor that he was owed.
 7. Jesus knew that he had to subject his human desires and his human will to God's will.
 8. He knew that he had to rely upon God's word rather than upon his appetites.
 9. So he told Satan, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Mt. 4:4)

- C. Satan then tempted Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple and trust that God would send angels to catch him.
1. Satan even added a Bible quotation to bolster this temptation, citing Psalm 91 when it says that God “will command his angels concerning you... On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”
 2. The devil was saying, ‘If you really are who you say you are, here is an opportunity to prove it.’
 3. Once again, Jesus refused to give in.
 4. He had no doubts about his identity as the Lord’s Anointed One, but he also knew that his path to glory went by the way of the cross.
 5. If he had displayed his glory by leaping from the temple into the arms of angels at that moment, he would have been seizing something that was not rightfully his.
- D. Satan’s third and final temptation was simultaneously the most bold and the most alluring.
1. He showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.
 2. And then he said, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”
 3. We might wonder how this could have been much of a temptation to Jesus.
 4. He is the eternal Son of God.
 5. He has always ruled over all the kingdoms of the world.
 6. Why would Satan’s offer have had any appeal to him?

7. What we have to remember is that Jesus was in his estate of humiliation.
 8. His divine glory was hidden beneath his humanity.
 9. He knew that he was God, but the world didn't know it.
 10. Why not cast aside the mask and show the world who he really is?
 11. But Jesus refused to seize the opportunity that Satan was setting before him because he knew that it was not the Father's will.
 12. He knew that he would only enter his glory after he endured the suffering that was ordained for him.
- E. We should ponder the fact that when Jesus was crucified, it was in between two men whom the writers of the Gospels refer to as "robbers."
1. Jesus had never stolen anything.
 2. He had always rendered to everyone the things that he owed to them.
 3. But he was numbered with the transgressors.
 4. He was hung between two thieves because he was there for people who are guilty of the sin of theft.
 5. He was there for us.

IV. The Eighth Commandment in the Christian Life

- A. As Christ's redeemed people, this commandment functions as a rule of life for us.
1. God's acceptance of us is not conditioned upon our conformity to this or any other portion of God's law, but this commandment does

show us how God wants us to live.

2. It teaches us a number of things about our work and our wealth.
 3. For one thing, it teaches us to be diligent workers.
 4. Those who are able-bodied but choose to live off of the work of others are guilty of theft.
 5. As we are told in 1 Thess. 4:11-12, we should “aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands... so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.”
 6. Isn't it interesting that Paul would summarize faithful Christian living in such a mundane way?
 7. It isn't very radical.
 8. That's because we aren't called to be radical.
 9. We are called to be faithful in everyday life.
 10. That is where your faith is really lived out.
 11. You can win the respect of your non-Christian neighbors and bring honor to the name of Christ by carrying out your ordinary responsibilities with faithfulness and integrity.
- B. Another reason why you should work diligently in your calling is so that you can be generous towards others and supportive of the church's ministry.
1. Ephesians 4:28 says, “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.”

2. God wants you to acquire material wealth not only to provide for yourself and your family, but also so that you can help other people when they are in need.
 3. God also wants you to be a partner in the gospel ministry by being financially supportive of the church and its mission.
- C. It is right for us to enjoy the fruit of our labors, with proper moderation.
1. Listen to the words of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 5:18-19: “Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God.”
 2. Notice that God is the giver of all of the things mentioned here.
 3. You can and should work hard to earn your living, but you must never forget that God gives wealth and possessions and the power to enjoy them.
 4. Always remember that everything that you have comes from God and that you have many reasons to be thankful to him.
- D. In a variety of ways, our culture encourages and perpetuates discontentment.
1. To a significant extent, discontentment is the engine that runs our economy, our political system, and many other aspects of modern society.
 2. You don't have to be a genius to see that this is not working out very well for our society.
 3. The reason why it is not working out is because the person who looks for contentment in the things of this world will always be

disappointed in the end.

4. New products lose their luster.
5. So do newly elected politicians.
6. And no matter how much money a person accumulates, it is never enough.
7. Only in Christ will your heart find true and lasting contentment.

V. Conclusion

- A. The temptation to take what is not rightfully ours or to withhold what we owe to others feeds off of our inclination to distrust God's providence.
- B. Because of this, the way to fight this temptation is to keep our focus upon God's ability to meet our needs and to express our gratitude for how he does so.
- C. The apostle Paul was in chains when he wrote his epistle to the Philippians, but he ended that letter by saying this: "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble... I am well supplied... And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (4:11b-14, 18, 19)