



## I'll Take What You Have

SERIES: *The Good Life: Finding Freedom in the Ten Commandments*

We're continuing our series on the Ten Commandments and this morning we come to the 8th commandment: **"You shall not steal."** It's amazing how creative we can be in breaking this command.

Three college freshman and three seniors were traveling home for Thanksgiving break. At the station, the three freshmen bought tickets for themselves and watched as the seniors bought just one ticket.

One of the freshmen asked, "How are the three of you going to travel on only one ticket?"

"Watch and learn," answered one of the seniors.

They all boarded the train. The three freshmen took their seats as all three seniors crammed into a bathroom together and closed the door. Shortly after the train departed, the conductor came around collecting tickets. He knocked on the bathroom door and said, "Ticket, please." The door opened just a crack and a single arm emerged with a ticket in hand. The conductor took it and moved on.

The freshmen observed and agreed it was a clever idea. They decided to do the same thing on the return trip and save some money.

When they got to the station a few days later, they bought a single ticket for the return trip. The seniors were also there, but they didn't buy a ticket at all. Perplexed, one of the freshmen asked, "How are you going to travel without a ticket?"

"Watch and learn," answered a senior.

When they boarded the train, the three seniors crammed into one bathroom and the three freshmen crammed into another one across the way. Shortly after the train was on its way, one of the seniors left their bathroom and walked to the bathroom where the freshmen were hiding. He knocked on the door and said, "Ticket, please."

When we come to the 8th commandment, we have to realize that there is no end to the ways we can break it.

### I. What does this command mean?

Stealing can simply be defined as taking something that doesn't belong to you without permission. That's pretty straight forward, but what we sometimes don't realize is that stealing includes a wide variety of things. I would place them under three categories.

**A. We can steal people:** The first category might surprise you, but most scholars agree that this was the most basic meaning of the 8th commandment: We can steal people. Deut. 24:7 says, **"If a man is caught stealing another Israelite, then enslaving or selling him, then that thief shall die."** We see how that happened in the story of Joseph. Years after his brothers sold him to the Midianites, he reflected on that and said that he was **"stolen out of the land of the Hebrews"** (Gen. 40:15). By the laws of Deuteronomy, his brothers were worthy of death. Even in our own day, kidnapping is a kind of theft that our society punishes severely.

**B. We can steal possessions:** Now there probably aren't a lot of kidnappers here so let's go to the second category. We can steal physical possessions, including money. This is what we usually mean when we talk about stealing. This includes all conventional types of theft like burglary, robbery, shoplifting. This would also include white collar theft like fraud, extortion, and racketeering. I doubt our economy would be in such bad shape if some people in high places would have listened to the 8th commandment. Five hundred years ago one pastor identified certain men of his day as "gentlemen swindlers" or "big operators." Some things never change.

But there are so many other ways we can break the 8th commandment. Why is it that one hotel reported in its first year of business having to replace 38,000 spoons, 355 coffee pots, and (get this) 100 Bibles!?! Then there are ways we steal from the government. We underpay on our taxes or we file false claims for disability. There is also theft at work. We help ourselves to office supplies, postage stamps, and long distance phone calls. We pad our expense accounts. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, employee theft cost businesses over \$50 billion annually. They estimate that 75% of all employees steal at least once, and that half of these steal again and again. One of every three business failures are the result of employee theft.

Then there are all those new ways we steal information with the advent of the internet. Pastors steal sermons, students steal term papers, businesses steal logos. And it seems almost everyone steals music. A Barna Group survey shows that 77% of teenagers who consider themselves Christians engaged in at least one type of music

piracy in the last six months. And only 10% of them believe it's wrong.

By the way, in the Old Testament, the punishment for stealing physical possessions wasn't death, but restitution. Not only did you have to pay back what you took, you also had to pay as much as five times the amount. Ex. 22:1 says, **"If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep."** Can you imagine if we did that today?

**C. We can steal intangibles:** I could go on forever in talking about ways we steal physical possession but let me go on to the third category: we steal intangibles. Jacob stole his brother Esau's blessing when he tricked his father into thinking he was Esau. It's interesting the Hebrew word for "deceive" literally means "to steal a person's heart." In 2 Samuel we have the story of David's ambitious son Absalom who schemed to take the throne of his aging father. He stood at the gate of the city and literally kissed up to the people. It says in 2 Sam. 15:6, **"In this manner Absalom dealt with all Israel who came to the king for judgment; so Absalom stole away the hearts of the men of Israel."** I can't help but think of how modern politicians have so often stolen the hearts of people not through hard work and integrity but through empty and deceptive promises.

One of things that's most commonly stolen today is a person's good name or reputation. We can steal a person's reputation through gossip and slander. The severe impact of such theft was seen in the life of David Livingstone. In the early days when he was exploring Africa, he left his wife at home in Great Britain. He wanted to protect her from some of the hardship while he prepared a place for them to live. But back in Britain people began to gossip, saying there was a problem in their marriage. The gossip cut so deep that Livingstone sent for his wife prematurely. After arriving in Africa, she became sick and died. By their slanderous tongues those people stole from him his reputation, his wife, and they stole from his ministry.

When you add all of this up, how we steal people, possessions and hearts and good names, you can understand why Martin Luther said, "If we look at mankind in all its conditions, it is nothing but a vast, wide stable of great thieves."

## II. Why do people steal?

It might be worth asking the question of why. Why do we steal? What drives us to do this? I tried to brainstorm all the reasons people steal and I came up with a rather large list.

Some people steal for the thrill of it. That's what convicted Augustine. He stole a pear from a tree and later

said, "There was a pear tree close to our own vineyard...which was not tempting either for its color or for its flavor. Late one night...a group of young scoundrels, and I among them, went to shake and rob this tree. We carried off a huge load of pears, not to eat ourselves, but to dump out to the hogs... Doing this pleased us all the more because it was forbidden. Such was my heart, O God... Behold, now let my heart confess to you what it was seeking there...having no inducement to evil but the evil itself..."

Some people steal because they have a sense of entitlement. Somehow we think we have the right. A few weeks ago I left my sunglasses at a hotel. I went back and found that no one had turned them in. I'm sure someone found them and said, "Nice sunglasses. Finders keepers." Or they might have thought, "Wow, these are expensive sunglasses. I'll bet the guy who owned these was rich. He probably has three more pairs just like it. Me, I could never afford a pair like this. It can't hurt if I keep them." That's entitlement.

Some people steal because they're lazy. Why wait for it and work for it when I can get it for free? Others steal because everyone does it. Everyone downloads software, why can't I? Still others steal because they know they won't get caught.

But no doubt the number one reason people steal is because of the pervasive greed and selfishness that's a part of our consumer culture. That's what drives capitalism, right? Now our leaders are telling us to go out and buy stuff. If you don't buy stuff, the system fails. On top of that, advertisers tell us if you don't buy their products you won't be attractive, you won't be productive. The Bible says, "You shall not steal" but if my image, my worth, my productivity, my very life are supposed to be determined by what I have rather than by what I am, no little command against stealing will stop my lust for more things.

We've seen what this command means and why people break it, but here is another question, Why is this so important?

## III. Why is this command so important?

**A. The principle of private property:** One of the things we have to understand is that there are a couple of very important assumptions that lie beneath this commandment and help us explain it. One is the principle of private property. The implication of this command is that it's legitimate to have possessions. If it wasn't, why would stealing be a problem? But God has put us together in such a way that part of our humanity and dignity is wrapped up in acquiring and managing possessions. We understand that it's God who grants us the ability to get wealth and accumulate worldly goods, so when we invade another person's property and steal from them we are sinning against God.

**B. The principle of stewardship:** But there is another assumption to keep in mind and that is the principle of stewardship. As believers, we know that everything we have comes from God and ultimately belongs to God. Someone has said that "In capitalism, the money is yours to do with what you want. In socialism, it belongs to the state, and the state uses it how it wants. In Christianity, it's God's and it must be used as God directs." Jerry Bridges says we can have three basic attitudes towards what we have. We can say, "What's yours is mine; I'll take it." That's the attitude of a thief. Or we can say, "What's mine is mine; I'll keep it." That's the attitude of selfish greed. Or we can say, "What's mine is God's; I'll share it." One of the ways we steal is by withholding from God and others what God has entrusted to us. God spoke through the prophet Malachi and said, "**Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings**" (Mal. 3:8-9). We have to come to grips with the fact that it's sometimes our own greed that causes us to hold onto our stuff so tightly that we contribute to creating a society where some people feel they have to steal just to get by. The principle of stewardship says we're called to be generous. We live in tough economic times. In times like these, we tend to hold on real tightly to what we have. But are we robbing God?

**C. Protection of the weak:** With those two principles in mind, let me give you a few more reasons this command is so important. One of the reasons is that this command protects the weak. In 1 Kings 21 there is a chilling story about King Ahab of Israel. There was a vineyard right next to his palace that he wanted very badly. But the owner of the vineyard, a guy named Naboth, didn't want to sell it to him. So Ahab was very sad and he walked around his palace pouting. When his wife Jezebel noticed she asked him what was wrong and he explained. Well, she was a kind of "let's get it done" kind of gal. She said, "Aren't you the king? You wimp. Let me take care of this." And she did. She brought some trumped up charges against Naboth. He was found guilty of a capital crime he never committed and was stoned. She came to Ahab and said, "Cheer up, sweetheart. Here's your vineyard." That's a violation of the 8th commandment because it applies equally to the rich and poor; the powerful and the weak. It was meant to protect the weak against this very kind of thing.

**D. Crucial for community:** Another reason this command is so important is that it is crucial for there to be any kind of genuine community. For community to take place there has to be trust and trust is impossible in an environment where this commandment is ignored. Instead of trust there is suspicion; instead of acceptance there is resentment; instead of peace there is fear. Anyone who has

ever had someone break into their home and rob them will tell you of the deep sense of personal violation they felt. It wasn't just that their stuff was taken; something deeper and more precious was violated than just a stereo or a piece of jewelry. One of our pastors, Justin Buzzard, told us the story this week in our staff meeting of how his family was robbed as a young boy. His father felt so deeply violated that he decided to start a business installing alarm systems in homes and that's been his job and his ministry for the past couple of decades. But in a society where everyone obeyed the 8th commandment, you wouldn't need alarm systems; there would be trust and community.

**E. A lack of trust in God:** But there is still one more reason this command is so important. It's because when we break the 8th commandment what we're really saying is we can't trust God. Whenever we take something that doesn't belong to us, we're saying that God isn't able to give us everything we truly need. As a matter of fact, when we steal in ANY of the ways I have mentioned, including withholding money that should be given, we're robbing God of the opportunity to supply our needs.

#### **IV. What should I do in light of this command?**

Not one of us is innocent when it comes to this command, so what should we do about it?

**A. Identify areas with ruthless honesty:** The first thing is we have to identify those areas where we're compromising. We have to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves about this. As I said, no one here is completely innocent. It may be something from your past you have never dealt with, or something you're involved with right now, or something you're thinking about doing in the future. The first thing is to stop rationalizing and call it what it is: sin.

**B. Confess and repent:** The second thing is confession and repentance. Confession is when you agree with God about that sin. You come to God and say, "God, you're right and I'm wrong. I confess this for what it is. It is sin." And part of confession is repentance. Remember, repentance is a change of attitude about sin that causes a change of action towards sin. So to really come clean with God you have to be serious about getting that thing out of your life.

**C. Make restitution:** The third thing is to make restitution. Some of us need to go back to those we've stolen from and confess it and return what we've taken. If that person or that organization or that business we've stolen from has been damaged by our theft beyond the value of what we've taken then we need to find a way to make that up to them.

Remember the story of Zaccheus? He was a tax collector. Tax collectors were notorious for cheating and

swindling people out of money. They were white collar thieves. But one day he heard Jesus was coming to town and there was such a crowd he had to climb up into a sycamore tree to see him because he was short. But Jesus found him up there and he called him down and he invited himself to spend the night at Zaccheus' house. And everybody was all upset because Jesus would befriend a jerk like that. But Zaccheus was so overwhelmed with joy that he said to Jesus, **"Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much."** What's that? That's restitution. That's a man whose attitude towards his stuff has been transformed.

**D. Work hard and give:** That leads to the fourth thing. Listen to what Ephesians 4:28 says, **"Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need."** The fourth thing isn't just to make restitution but to become a person who works and then shares part of what he's earned to help others. So you have a complete turnaround in this person's life. They've gone from being a taker to being a giver. I've seen that happen in people's lives. I've seen them not just stop stealing, but then get a job and then start looking for people to share with.

**E. Practice contentment and gratitude:** The fifth thing is more on the preventative side. Learn to practice contentment and gratitude. This is a neglected discipline among believers. How often do you complain about all that you DON'T have? All that does is ignite within you an attitude of greed and desire. So instead of that start practicing gratitude for what you do have. At first you may not even feel grateful, but force yourself to do it. Look around at what God has given you. Don't just look at material things; look at some of the intangibles. As you prime the pump of gratitude you'll find yourself becoming more content, more willing to trust God, more willing to wait on him, more other-centered and less likely to break this commandment.

## CONCLUSION

All of us stand before God guilty in some way of breaking the 8th commandment. Luther said, "It is the smallest part of the thieves that are hung. If we were to hang them all, where shall we get enough rope? We must take all our belts and straps into halters."

Do you know what comforts me? It comforts me to know that Jesus died on the cross between two thieves. The Bible says that when he was crucified **"two robbers were crucified with him; one on the right and one on the left"** (Matt. 27:38). This was a fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of Isaiah who wrote, **"he was numbered with the transgressors"** (Is. 53:12). That means that in his crucifixion Jesus was considered a thief. He was numbered among the thieves. There weren't just two thieves there that day, there were three. Jesus was numbered among thieves so that he might suffer and die for our thievery. He died as a thief for thieves so that every thief who trusts in him could be forgiven and saved. The first thief to be saved was hanging right next to him. He said, **"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."** And Jesus said to him what he says to all who trust in him: **"Today you will be with me in paradise."**