
VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: TEN COMMANDMENTS

LECTURE 15: THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

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The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

TEN COMMANDMENTS

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Lecture 15

THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

The love of money is the root of all evil. Though Scripture supports this truth with so many examples, yet mankind doesn't learn. Greed causes us to lay hands on that which isn't given to us. It is very unsettling to find your home robbed and precious possessions taken away. Therefore, it is God's goodness to legislate the 8th commandments. But the extent of 'not stealing' is much broader than literal theft. God also calls us to be good stewards of what He allows us to possess on earth.

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 15

Welcome, dear friends. Today we will focus our thoughts on the eighth commandment: "Thou shalt not steal." And, I've given it the title, *Handling God's Resources*. Before we look at the eighth, let's think about an eighth principle, which we derive from the Scriptures in Matthew 12, and which the Westminster Catechism sums up as follows. It writes that 'what God forbids is never to be done, and that what God commands is always to be done.' And that part is simple and straightforward, but then they add the sentence, "Yet, every particular duty is not to be done at all times." That particular sentence can raise a few eyebrows. What is meant with that? And, it is tied in with the Scripture from Matthew 12:1-9, and I encourage you to check out that passage as I speak about it.

Jesus is confronted by a charge that He and His disciples are violating the Sabbath Day. According to the Jewish pharisaical law, plucking a head of wheat and rubbing it between your hands and eating it is the work of harvesting and reaping and obviously forbidden. And so, Jesus answers them in that context and tells them that necessity allows a law to be set aside if a life is at stake. He therefore brings in the example of David eating the bread of the table of showbread in the Old Testament, and Jesus shows that the priest and David did no wrong when they transgressed the ceremonial law which limited the showbread to be eaten only by the priests. There was an overriding need for mercy as David and his men were fainting with hunger. So therefore, Jesus sums up this incident in verse seven with this principle, "but if you had known what this meaneth, 'I will have mercy, and not sacrifice,' ye would not have condemned the guiltless."

The principle that Jesus lays down is that no ordinance of God is to be pressed as far as to make us neglect the duty of charity or emergency. The first table of the law is not to be so interpreted as to make us break the second when we face an urgent need of a fellow human being we are to love. And again, there are situations in our life in the sinful, broken world where there are these conflicts of law versus law. So, Jesus teaches us that there are times we must choose mercy above duty, and that's what that sentence meant or means in the Westminster Catechism when it says, "Yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times." Let me, obviously, caution you and myself. There [are] many of us who take this principle as an excuse to break God's law and indulge themselves far too easily or cover up a sin by appealing to this argument, and that is not ever what our Lord intended.

So, having looked at that eighth principle relating to the law of God, let's now turn our attention to the eighth commandment: Thou shall not steal. I've titled it *Handling God's Resources*. So, there are three particular thoughts that we want to work through. First, what is the truth about what we own? And secondly, what are the limits in how we acquire possessions? And then thirdly, how am I to be a good steward of my possessions? So, these three things are interrelated with the eighth commandment, "thou shalt not steal."

What is the truth about what we possess, or what is the underlying assumption in the eighth commandment? The eighth commandment assumes that we personally possess resources, things; and most of us, of course, will think about cars or cows or land or money. And indeed, the material assets [are] part of that, but there [are] far more resources that we possess or that we are given. Everything that God has created and everything that He even has re-created in the life of grace is God's.

Now, let's think that through for a moment. The air that we breathe, the sunlight we soak up, the land we walk on, all these things are God's resources that we may use but not waste, not exploit, not pollute. But, think about the resource of time, your and my health, the strength God gives us, or in a different level the positions He has given us as a husband or as a father or as a leader, as a manager, or even the talents that He has given us. We have a variety of talents. Every one of us is talented in different ways, which are God's resources given to us.

Some of us are skilled with our hands, and we are repairmen, or we are builders. Some of us are good with our head, and we're inventors. We are engineers. We organize, or we're leaders. We give advice. Others are very good with their heart. They're compassionate. They're good listeners or counselors, or perhaps are in the medical, nursing or doctor, field. They desire to help fellow, suffering men. There [are] even others who are artistic with music and painting. All these are resources that God has given us, even the gifts of grace which God gives in the [lives] of His people. Peter points out in I Peter 4:10, "As every man has received a gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." Well, what kind of gifts is Peter thinking of? Well, the gift of teaching, the gift of compassion, the gift of hospitality or leadership or listening, all kinds of gifts that God has given for us to use for Him.

So, let's remind ourselves [that] this great Creator, this sovereign Possessor has determined the limits or the size or the number of our resources in our life. Proverbs 22:2 states that really clearly. It reads, "the rich and the poor, they meet together, but the LORD is the maker of them all." So, instead of grumbling at God's sovereignty and providence in which He has decided how to divide the various resources among mankind, we would be more satisfied and far more profitable when we faithfully use what God receives.

"Thou shalt not steal." In fact, think about it this way. We often forget [that] we ourselves are possessions. We don't possess ourselves. Our Creator possesses us. He's the upholder, the provider, the maintainer of us. He made us for His purpose, for His advantage, for serving His kingdom and His cause to do His will. And in some way, isn't that already convicting us when we think about the eighth commandment, "thou shalt not steal," when it comes to, "How do we handle the resources God has given us to handle?" We don't own our possessions. We are the stewards of God's.

Psalms 24:1, let me just read a few Scriptures to remind us of this truth, "The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and all they that dwell therein." Or, in I Chronicles 29:11-12 David writes, "For all that is in heaven and in earth is thine;... both riches and honor come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all." What a beautiful confession [of] where everything comes from that we own or possess, or rather, that we are the stewards of. Psalm 50:10-11, the Lord reminds us very nicely, "For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine." Someone who really remembered this was Job. You know the story when the Lord took away everything in one day, except his wife. What a grand confession, "The LORD gave; the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

So, to sum up this first thought, stealing begins long before I reach out to my neighbor's goods and make them mine. Stealing begins when I consider myself the ultimate owner of the earthly or material things that I have or the talents I have been given. So, "thou shalt not steal." What are the limits of how we may acquire our possessions? Again, before we consider the directions about not stealing, let's consider the principle that forms the basis of the eighth.

We have a right to private possession, though we remain stewards. If that wasn't the case, there was no need for the eighth commandment. Then, God did not have to forbid us to steal. God assumes that His creatures have a right to private ownership. I may therefore consider some of these things as mine or yours. I'm given the right to use it, to enjoy it, to handle it, to expand it, to do something creative with it, or to multiply it. [It's] given to me as a stewardship. Yet, I am not the ultimate owner of it. That all remains His. So, because of that, nobody has the right to take what God has given me on his own accord. "Thou shalt not steal." God has protected private property. And therefore, friends, a forced redistribution of wealth in money or land *isn't* anywhere a biblical command. What happens in the early church in Acts 2:44–45 was a voluntary giving of those who had extra to the needy, not a forced redistribution.

Think of God's great men and women in the Bible. I particularly think of Abraham and Job. They both were rich men, and they had many servants, but they didn't redistribute their wealth among all their servants that they had. So therefore, if money or property has been lawfully inherited or lawfully acquired through your hard work or your wise business investments, then we are [to] consider them as God's gift to us to use and to manage our wealth on His behalf, to His glory, and of course the service of our fellow man. So, having established that, let's now then look at what the lawful, or even unlawful, means by which we are acquiring or not acquiring our possessions.

First, the lawful means. Obviously, [that is] by working hard, using your talents and your resources in a responsible and a godly manner in order to provide for yourself and those who are dependent on you. God commands us, when we are healthy and able, to work six days a week. He frowns on slothfulness. He frowns on those who live from handouts from others while they are capable of providing for themselves. Listen to Ephesians 4:28, where God forbids, 'thou shalt not steal other people's goods.' And these words are followed by, "but rather let them labor, working with his hands the thing which is good, that you may give to him that has real needs." It shows clearly [that] the Lord is implying that those who are not laboring with their own hands to provide are stealing.

Likewise, Paul exhorts in II Thessalonians 3:12 that with all quietness we are to work and to eat our own bread. Once again, back to the book of Proverbs chapter 6, God sends us to the ants and to the school of ants. 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard; and consider her ways and learn' (verse 6). And, God shows the wisdom, the beauty, and the diligence of the ant, providing [for] themselves for the future. So, He commands hard work, and He condemns slothfulness or wastefulness of what He has given us.

We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. That also means that we work in order to provide for ourselves as well as to share when, of course, we have enough. And once more, to support this is the parable Jesus spoke in Matthew 25:14–29, and Jesus uses the example of the very diligent versus the very slothful steward to set in place the command "thou shalt not steal." He praised those who have lawfully used their talents to increase their talents to more, but he who failed to use his talents was severely rebuked. And the point? "Do not steal" means, "use your resources; don't depend on others, but provide [for] yourself through hard work, diligence, [and] wise investment." Those are the commands that the Lord gives us in this eighth commandment.

Now, working hard applies, of course, to all lawful callings that will provide not only what I need but also may increase what I have. All callings that honor the 10 Commandments in every aspect [are] lawful callings, whether that's in the trades, in the business, in the service industry, in the science world, in the medical field, in the ministry, military, or government. The callings in which we honor the ten are lawful occupations and are worthy, each one of them in their place. And as long as none of them pursue practices that are dishonest and fraudulent or merciless, we are to pursue them. Think of John the Baptist as he faces the soldiers, I assume Roman soldiers, he doesn't tell them "quit being a soldier." He tells them, "Stop being violent," sixth commandment. "Don't accuse anybody falsely," ninth commandment, and "Be content with your wages," tenth commandment (Luke 3:14). And so, if they may pursue this soldier task without these sins, they are doing right.

There are times that the call to follow Christ means that we are to give up our job, or we are to sever our business relationships, or we ought to step away from alluring positions. Jesus calls His disciples to cut out the right eye and to cut off the right hand (Matthew 5:29–30). He's talking about events or positions or sinful temptations that may lead us astray, and that not only applies to the seventh commandment. That also applies to the eighth commandment. Anything that leads us from the narrow way to the broad way, we need to cut out. So therefore,

if there are cases where our economic position or our financial activity would bring us into conflict with the law of God, then clearly the call of Christ is that we need to separate ourselves from that.

But, let's remind ourselves, for those of us who have felt this pinch, also financially, and the temptation to become dishonest or to cut corners, let's remind ourselves of the promise that Jesus gives us in Matthew 19:29, 'Everyone that has forsaken houses or family or lands,' may I add? jobs or positions or opportunities to be rich, "shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life." Moses stands before us as the hero of faith when he despised the riches of Egypt as worthless and [would] rather associate himself with God's people, and God reminded us that "he had a respect to the recompense of the reward" (Hebrews 11:26). Moses knew what he gave up would be more than compensated by what he received.

So, God forbids in the eighth commandment any unlawful means in acquiring what is not yours. Obviously, "thou shalt not steal" means we do not take what doesn't belong to us. Recognize here God's loving devotion. The things I own, the things that I handle, the things I've built up in my business or in my farm, we begin to in some way really admire or esteem it. It's part of us, and there's a certain pride in that as well, and the Lord protects that. "Thou shalt not steal." Do not lay your hands on what others have been receiving or what others have been given. He builds a fence of protection around the little kingdom that He has given us to handle or to manage on His behalf.

But, God also forbids in the eighth commandment any unlawful means to gain possession of things or of titles or positions. Those in sales break the eighth commandment when they are deceitful about their products to sell something above its worth and to hide certain weaknesses or faults on it. [In] taking advantage of the ignorance of the buyer is the eighth commandment broken. That's not a good deal. That's a nasty steal in God's eyes. Using false measurements, false calculations, [playing] around [with] the statistical numbers to provide an incorrect picture is the transgression of the eighth commandment. At work, if we [are] working for an employer and we waste our paid time and let it be interrupted with unnecessary phone calls or we record a dishonest number of working [hours], we are breaking the eighth commandment.

If we are on the world market of investments, our method must not be speculation or taking a quick advantage of some inside knowledge to make large gains at the expense of the loss of others. That is not loving your neighbor as you would like to be loved. Investment in a company stock is a legitimate business, but using inside knowledge to make excessive gains at the expense of others would be a transgression of the spirit of the eighth commandment. In the world of writing, stealing somebody else's words is a theft if those words aren't acknowledged. In the world of music or manufacturing, stealing somebody's ideas and then using them to make your own product is a theft in God's eyes. In the world of its insurance, we steal when we inflate a claim or hide the real story about how the dent came into our car in order to profit from the business of insurance to cover our own mistake. That's stealing.

And we steal when we through dishonesty or slander gain a position or gain a promotion. That's stealing again. We steal when we evade the taxes of our country. God clearly speaks of that in Romans 13:7, "Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; and custom to whom custom is due." If we are an employer, we also steal when we do not give our workers an adequate wage, when we pay them [insufficiently] for them and their families [to have] enough provisions. That is stealing, and James rallied against this form of theft in James 5 when he really charges the rich with the sin of stealing from their workers. So friends, "thou shalt not steal."

God also [makes] that application spiritually. You and I are not our own creators. God has made us more talented, perhaps, than others, but they are His talents. They're His gifts, and we are to use them for His glory, and to use them for our neighbor's well-being. Be careful, therefore, with undue praise to yourself [for] what really belongs to your Maker, to the Author or Originator and Enabler. The apostle Paul asked in I Corinthians 4:7 when he sees all this competition and praise among the Christians, he says, "Who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hast not received it?" We did not create our bodies, nor our minds. They were all formed by our Creator to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. What a theft of Him when we use all that for our own glory, our own name, our own comfort, our own increase.

Let me not then omit to remind you that God has given us one commandment to remind us continually that all we are stewards of His resources, and that is the command to tithe. One tenth of our income belongs to God.

Malachi spoke on behalf of God when he writes in Malachi 3, “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed me. But you say, Wherein have we robbed thee?” And the answer is, “In tithes and in offerings” (verse 8). Yes, to give a tithe is a test of faith, especially when your budget is tight and your bills are many, but don’t forget God’s promise to those who faithfully honor Him in returning what is His to Him. Listen to the promise He promised. He says, “Prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open unto you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, and there shall not be room enough to receive it” (verse 10).

God’s command to tithe is not only a spiritual test, of course. It’s also a practical way to provide for the financial needs of His church and His kingdom, mission work and all the other activities that are done for His sake, in and through His church. It’s a spiritual test, indeed, to remind us again that we own nothing. We’re only stewards of what is the Lord’s. That’s a spiritual test, is tithing, to make us face the innate covetousness that we all have deep in our heart. But friends, how much sweeter is a life in which we aren’t owned by our possessions or we aren’t owned by our drive to enrich ourselves, but rather we own our possessions to enrich others and to serve our Creator.

So then lastly, how am I to be a good steward of God’s resources? Well, that’s the reverse side of “thou shalt not steal.” That is, “thou shalt give. Thou shalt donate. Thou shalt share.” The Heidelberg Catechism sums up [again] this duty of the eighth commandment in a beautiful sentence. It says, “That I promote the advantage of my neighbor in every instance I can or may, and deal with him as I desire to be dealt with by others; further also that I faithfully labor,” Why? “so that I may be able to relieve the needy,” and therefore not to be abusers or waste His gifts. So again, “thou shalt not steal” is “thou shalt give.” Listen to John the Baptist when he gives us very practical instruction. He says to his hearers if they have two coats, well then share one of them with a cold neighbor (Luke 3:11). [Isn’t] that what we should like to receive when we are cold?

Quite instructive is James’s passage in James 5. Only 40 years after the great Pentecostal beginning of the church, he needs to write [to] church members that are rich [about] stealing. And how did they steal? Well, listen to this. James preached about the gold and silver that is eaten away with rust. The word is *cankered*, *rusty*. In other words, the gold and silver is unused. It is collected. It’s hoarded. It’s too much. It’s rusted. It is of no use to the people that own it. But in the meantime, it could have been used help those around that are needy. And James says that rusted gold and silver will be a testimony against us in the Day of Judgment. Then, he goes to the garment, to the clothes closet, and he speaks about the garments that are moth-eaten. In other words, they’re hanging in closets unused, instead of hanging around the shoulders of fellow men. And the point that James is making is [that] we are stealing when we have all our leftovers and our extras and we store it away, rather than distributing it or sharing it with those that are really needy.

The apostle Paul concludes the first letter to Timothy exhorting the rich not only to watch against trusting in uncertain riches but also, and there it comes again, to be good, ready to distribute, willing to communicate, to share (I Timothy 6:17–19). So, “thou shalt not steal.” Did you know that no earthly subject gets as much attention in the holy Scriptures of God [as] the subject of money? God knows where our chief dangers lie and therefore hammers home on the details of the eighth. One pointed parable [about] how the rich hardly enter into the kingdom of God [shows] the dangers of money (Matthew 19:24).

Some years ago, there was a competition about the best definition of money, and the best definition chosen was this one, with which I will end this lecture. It says, “Money is an article which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven, and money is a universal provider of everything except happiness.” So with that, we’ll conclude this topic on the eighth commandment. May the Lord bless it. Thank you.