

Let the Thief No Longer Steal: Commandment 8

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0:00] Well, we're thinking this morning about the eighth of the Ten Commandments, you shall not steal. I recommend people say things like, I'm not a Christian, but I like the values of Christianity, the teaching of Jesus, the Ten Commandments, that this is the kind of thing they mean.

If you've ever said something like that, I reckon that you didn't mean the first commandment, you shall have no other gods before me. Well, that's not very inclusive, is it? Or the fourth commandment, to keep the Sabbath.

Well, there's stuff on the Sunday that I need to be at. Perhaps you didn't even mean the fifth commandment, honor your father or mother. Or the seventh, do not commit adultery. I'm a grown-up, right? I'm an adult. I can make my own decisions.

By the way, we haven't actually forgotten the seventh commandment. I think we've skipped over it. That's next week. And if you have kids, mums and dads, maybe it's time to have that conversation before our seven-plus-year-olds hear the word of God next Sunday morning.

But at least this we can all get behind, right? What society on earth thinks that stealing is okay? We're all signed-up members of the Eighth Commandment Club, aren't we, right?

[1:22] Apart from those who contributed to the more than half a million police reports of shoplifting last year, that's an increase of 20% on the previous year, or who contributed to the figure of £666 million worth of packages reportedly stolen from people's doorstep, or indeed the police forces, which don't follow up on those reports because it's not seen as a serious enough offense to take up their time.

Of course, it's not just porch pirates, is it? You can go online and spend a fascinating half hour reading the list of things that Peter Murrell spent £400,000 worth of embezzled money on, including a £2,500 pair of salt and pepper grinders, two toilet seats, and something called a men's slouch pouch onesie.

Doesn't bear imagining, does it? Bizarrely, the first thing he thought to buy with his embezzled money was two laundry baskets. Talk about the banality of evil. Meanwhile, lots of small businesses this past week have only been able to watch on helplessly as their livelihood is literally taken off the shelf and got away with without being paid for.

Back in April, there was a spate of burglaries of collectible shops, and between the shops, somewhere between £30,000 and £80,000 worth of Pokemon cards was taken away.

Some of you will have seen in the most recent series of Clarkson's Farm, Jeremy Clarkson claims that his pub, the farmer's dog, has to replace 400 pint glasses a week that people take home with them as a souvenir.

[3:11] The examples are endless. We could go on and on. And those were not hard to find. You just need to open up the news app, don't you? But just to pause on Jeremy for a minute, I wonder how many of us heard that and thought, well, it's only a pint glass, and he of all people can afford it.

I reckon Clarkson's pint glasses are a fairly good acid test of how much we actually really agree with the Eighth Commandment.

Like the famous golden statue of Lady Justice on top of the Old Bailey in London, God's law passes judgment blindfolded. Not randomly or arbitrarily, but with zero regard for someone's social standing or wealth or celebrity.

Everybody gets equal protection under God's law, and nobody is above God's law. But do we secretly actually think that it's okay to steal from Jeremy Clarkson?

Or at least it's not as bad, is it, as stealing from the corner shop, which is better than stealing from your neighbor. And of course, you would rather do that than steal from your own family, wouldn't you?

[4 : 31] Better to pinch your kid's birthday money than to take from your elderly parents, unless, of course, you really, really need it, and you're going to pay it back, or they just don't find out.

Friends, we kid ourselves that our sense of right and wrong is God's sense of right and wrong. God's standard is far higher than our hearts really conceive or believe.

We're conflicted personally and as a society over seemingly the most obvious and uncontroversial of God's commands. But I hope today, as we open up God's law together, we see God's pure heart shine through all the more clearly.

We see the darkness of our own hearts in their sinfulness. And we see more of our great treasure, the Lord Jesus Christ, that he will be more precious to us than when we arrived this morning.

So, let's get in. As we are used to, hopefully by now, let's ask firstly, what do these laws preach? It's less obvious than other sections, but I've been convinced this week that this block of judgments preaches the Lord's perfect provision, his perfect provision.

[5 : 45] Clearly, there's a property law. So, theft, verse 1, if a man steals an ox or a sheep, or criminal negligence, property damage, verse 5, a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or verse 6, a fire is lit that burns somebody else's grain in the field.

You know, those are not deliberate acts of vandalism, but carelessness that's led to property being damaged. But then verse 7 takes us into a more kind of private domain that our laws maybe don't touch today.

So, if you give money or valuables to a neighbor to look after when you're on holiday, for example, and they go missing or it gets stolen, or verse 14, conversely, if you borrow something and it gets damaged, what to do?

So, there's a whole range of situations that are being covered in just a few verses, but running through all of them is an underlying protection of personal property from theft, loss, and damage. And on the face of it, we're familiar with that today, aren't we? You can get insurance to cover those things, business insurance, contents insurance. If you hire a car, you get insurance.

[7 : 03] If you rent a flat, you sign a tenancy agreement. However, the really striking thing about finding all of that in God's law is that it tells us that the moral basis of personal property and ownership isn't primarily horizontal, something that we have just kind of come up with.

No, the moral basis of personal property and ownership is primarily vertical, from above. So, the Lord doesn't say, I've given you parents, so honor them.

Life, so protect it. Love, so guard it. But, you know, when it comes to your stuff, your money, your possessions, well, you guys just figure that out among yourselves. That's nothing really to do with me. No, alongside do not murder and do not commit adultery is do not steal.

Because just as much as we have life from God and love from God, we have what we have from God.

He can ensure it in his law from theft, loss, and damage because he is ultimately the one who gave it to us. He wants us to have full use of his good gifts and not be deprived of them by others' sin or carelessness.

[8 : 29] One of the founders of modern economics, Adam Smith, you can see his statue on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, often wearing a cone on his head.

He wrote famously that markets work as if guided by an invisible hand that matches up supply and demand. Well, the Bible goes further.

The Bible says that behind that invisible hand of market forces is a vast, invisible, all-knowing, most wise, merciful, and gracious mind guiding all that he has created according to his great purposes for his glory and the good of those who love him.

God's law says we have what we have in the bank, on our bodies, in our homes, our home itself, our job, our income, our business and workplace, everything that we use, eat, drink, spend.

We have it because he, the creator and sustainer of the universe, has wisely, graciously, and abundantly provided it for us to use in this season of our brief time on earth.

[9 : 45] I wonder, brothers and sisters, this morning, to what extent do you actually believe that that is true? God normally provides for us through our work, but we do not own things because we have worked for them.

That's a really tricky distinction for us to make in our minds, isn't it? We trip over it really often, but think about it. If we own what we work for, then what moral property rights do people have who, for whatever reason, can't work?

It's not often the preacher asks you to meditate on your portfolio, but think for a minute, think for a minute about the number in the bank account your assets, your property, your wealth, what you own.

Think about it for a minute. Can you really, with a clear conscience, claim that you deserve all that you have? Pretty much everything God's people have at this point in Exodus, God gave them freely as plunder from Egypt, and everything they will have at the end of their journey, God will give them freely as an inheritance in the promised land.

In Deuteronomy 6, Moses will say, and when the Lord your God brings you into the land, he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you, with great and good cities that you did not build, houses full of good things that you did not fill, cisterns that you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant, when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

[11 : 31] If they could forget the Lord when they didn't even have to work for what they had, but he gave it to them freely, how much more can we forget him when so much of what we have he gives us through our income?

It's an age-old problem for God's people, having God's good gifts and forgetting who gave them.

You could fairly say, I think, that that's the issue at the heart of our economic woes today.

Disclaimer, I'm not an economist, there's probably a million reasons why everything's so topsy-turvy, but at heart. 300 years ago, the father of liberalism, John Locke, said that everyone comes into the world with their body and a capacity to work.

And what you work on, he said, becomes yours, your property. Your property is like an extension of your body through your labor. And he said, you can take your fill of that, work as much as you want, have as much property as you want, as long as you leave enough in common for other people and their needs.

And the role of the state, he said, is to protect all of that, property rights and general equity. That's the foundation of so much of our legal basis for property law today.

[12 : 54] But then 100 years or so later comes the father of communism, Karl Marx, who looks at that and says, so, if you gain property through your work, then shouldn't the workers own the factories and the farms?

And how do you ensure as a state there's nothing in common for everyone's needs? Well, you absorb the private property that you need into public ownership and distribute it according to people's needs.

Now, I'm no economist, but it's not hard to see, is it, that though they sound like two very different economic theories, they're actually two applications, two outworkings of the same principle that the moral basis of personal property and ownership is human work and human need.

But that creates a dilemma. Every debate about the economy that you'll hear today in the news is basically a recycling of that same old tension between private property and public need that no one since the Enlightenment has really been able to crack.

Because the world's view of property and possessions is built on the foolishness of imagining that we have stuff based on who we are, what we do, rather than on God's generous provision.

[14 : 18] We have lost sight of where it all comes from and so we do not know how to handle it, how to share it, what to do with it. In these laws, the Lord is saying, I want you to have what I've given you to use for my glory and you're not to deprive others of what I've given to them to use for my glory.

The Lord provides land to grow crops and he provides crops to feed the poor. Deuteronomy 24, he says to landowners, the edges of your field or what's left on the vines and the trees is to be left for those who have no land, who have no vines and no trees to come and take from freely to eat.

In Ephesians 4, we heard earlier, the Lord provides work for people and he provides help through their work for those who have need. Let the thief no longer steal but rather let him labor doing honest work with his own hands.

Why? So that he may have something to share with anyone in need. If you have a job or an income, property, investments, land, produce, those things matter to God.

The Lord has given it to you. And you glorify him by enjoying it with a grateful heart and blessing others with it.

[15 : 43] Jesus said, in passing, when he was anointed at Bethany, you will always have the poor among you and whenever you want, you can do good for them. Notice he didn't say you can end

poverty if you want to.

He actually said the opposite. You will always have the poor among you. I take it then from the mouth of Jesus, that is deliberate so that in the unsearchable wisdom of God and his providence, we can always do good for our brothers and sisters who have less than we do as often as we have opportunity locally and globally and thereby glorify him because he is glorified as our provider and sustainer in and through our enjoyment, employment and generous deployment of his generous provision for us.

How much better would our society be if we lived not as if there was no sin and we could all just do what we want without consequence or that all work and all property is sin and needs to be redistributed, but rather as sinners saved by grace, we received God's every gift with grateful hearts and generously put it to work in his service for others' good and his glory.

Brothers and sisters, that society exists in utero in the church of the Lord Jesus. It's one of the earliest snapshots of the church we get in Acts chapter 2, people selling what they had to provide for each other.

They received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. How could they do that? Because they knew the Lord to be their perfect provider and glorified him in the way they treated his perfect provision.

[17 : 38] That is what this commandment preaches. But now what does it point out? Well, it points out that far from drawing out from us any innate generosity of spirit, God's abundant provision for us actually draws out from us our self-centeredness and greed.

See, just as much as the existence of property laws in God's word tell us where property ultimately comes from, they also tell us we live in a world where the thief does break in and steal.

And God knows that. While these laws were given, your livestock was your livelihood. So sheep, they clothed you, they fed you, they could act as currency.

Your ox was like your tractor, your farm tools that you needed to work the land. It's hard to believe, isn't it, that someone would be so outrageously greedy that they would steal your ox, your sheep, and kill it or sell it.

It would be crippling to a household to suffer that loss. And yet, evidently, it did happen. The most unashamed, unapologetic theft with zero remorse for the suffering it caused.

[18 : 52] Who would dare, we wonder, to break into the Louvre and steal the French crown jewels? And yet, October last year, four men and a furniture lift or something and some tools broke into the Louvre, took the crown jewels.

Five of them were charged with robbery, but the jewels are still missing. worth estimated \$100 million. Who would dare to embezzle almost half a million pounds from the governing party in Scotland?

And yet, the chairman of that party did so over the course of 12 years. We wonder at how many walls they must have smashed through in their own consciences to get to the point of doing that. But those exceptions prove the rule, don't they? that human beings in our sin are perfectly capable of the most brazen forms of theft.

The truth is that there is nothing that we wouldn't steal from other people if the greed in our own hearts was not restrained by the state, by our conscience, and ultimately by God's grace.

[19 : 58] Think how many thousands of people literally spend their days sitting, making phone calls, and setting up websites to deliberately lure people into scams in order to steal their savings.

Very often, that money can't be recovered. I'd be surprised if there was anyone in this room who's not received a scam phone call or email. Very often, the victims are the most vulnerable people, and the judge of all the earth condemns that wickedness.

If you steal outright from someone for your own personal gain, the Lord sets the fine at four or five times the amount you stole, five for oxen for an ox, four sheep for a sheep, it's quite a terran, isn't it?

Someone caught breaking into a house in the day might be sold to pay back the damage. If they break in during the night, they might even be killed. Now, the punishment for stealing in the nations around at the time, generally, was to be put to death.

In some places, that's the case today. Famously, Sharia law, your hand gets locked off. Importantly, really importantly, the Lord says that's not just.

[21:14] Yes, there has to be restitution and repayment, but money and possessions generally are not worth the price of a human life. Even the thief who breaks in during the night, it's not a penal execution, provision.

It's a provision for self-defense. In other words, it's a life for a life, not a life for a home, a car, or valuables.

In a sense, the Lord is saying it's just money, just stuff. Stuff can be replaced. People can't be. And yet, a fine four or five times what you stole or being sold or risking your life, it still says that God is outraged when people steal from each other.

So friends, this is perhaps the most obvious application that I could make. I've learned over the course of my ministry that it's worth making the obvious points that if you are involved in any way, in any kind of deceitful scheme, fraud, embezzlement, theft, tax evasion, and so on.

The Lord puts a high price on that. It is not harmless. It is sin. It offends God. There are victims. Do not get sucked in. Give it up.

[22:36] Most of us, if not all of us, won't live in that world of upmarket theft. But if we're honest, we know that that doesn't get us off the hook. Even if our stealing is more garden variety, well, the Lord still demands that we pay back what we've stolen.

If you've kept something that you know belongs to somebody else in the hope that they won't want it back or will forget all about it, if you've claimed expenses at work for things that were really personal spending, not a company cost, if you've parked without paying in the hope that the traffic warden doesn't come past, if you've got something for nothing that you should have paid for or returned, you've broken the eighth commandment.

It is stealing and the Lord requires it be repaid. Verses four and seven say if you're caught in possession of stolen goods, the fine is two times what you stole, whatever it is.

Notice that's significantly less than if you've already sold or consumed what you stole. It is less serious. But no matter how big or small the theft, it is still a sin and under God's law it comes at a cost.

If you're not totally sure about that, these laws go on to talk about looking after other people's stuff and it getting lost or damaged. That's not greed, is it? But it still drills down into our self-centeredness, our selfishness when we don't take as good care of other people's stuff as we do our own.

[24:13] You know, even if you borrow something, the Lord says, and it gets damaged or broken because you haven't looked after it, it deserves to be replaced. That's an accident, we might say, but it's potentially a costly accident.

How much more, then, stuff that we haven't borrowed or accidentally damaged but actually taken, kept, hidden, spent, stolen?

I listened to an interview with the evangelist J. John a couple of years ago. He said when he preaches through the Ten Commandments at evangelistic events, he'll often put giant bins at the front of the room and at the end of every talk, he'll declare a kind of amnesty.

So he preaches on the Sixth Commandment, you shall not murder, and at the end of his talk, he'll call for people to repent and bring to the next session any weapons, knives, guns, ammo they have and dump it in the bin and be rid of it.

When he preaches on the Eighth Commandment, you shall not steal, he tells people to repent and bring to the next session anything they have that is not theirs.

[25:26] Stuff, money, whatever, put it in the bin. Every time, he says, the next session, the bins are overflowing with stuff, cash, whatever.

Clearly, there are no bins here this morning. I don't think I dare to do that. But, let's have our own amnesty this week.

Okay? Return what you have that isn't yours. Books, whatever, equipment, baking dishes, pay people back that you owe money to, own up to whatever it is you've lost or stolen somebody else's. If, like Zacchaeus, you purposely cheated anyone out of money or services or goods, in repentance, pay back two, three, four times what you took, if not to the victim, then to God's people and to the poor.

And if you're on the receiving end of that restitution and somebody comes to you blushing with a baking dish, I say this for my own sake, extend to them the grace and forgiveness of the gospel that the Lord holds out to us when we have sinned.

[26:48] Friends, let us repent of our greed and self-centeredness and learn by God's law to deal justly and fairly with what the Lord has provided for others and ourselves, knowing that when we turn to the Lord, we will never, ever be the poorer for it.

Because thirdly and finally, he promises more than restitution. We're not told what he stole, but we are told where he died and where he went next.

On the cross next to Jesus, one on either side, two men sentenced to death for breaking the eighth commandment, two robbers. One joined him with the crowds.

Luke says, he railed at Jesus. Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. But, says Luke, the other robber rebuked him. Do you not fear God?

Since you are under the same sentence of condemnation and we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong. one thief still trying to avoid the consequences of his crimes, one admits that this is what he deserves.

[28:09] I wonder, which thief are you closer to this morning? As we've reflected on our sins of stealing, have we tried to justify ourselves, excuse our actions, push the guilt away, or have we called our sins to mind, owned up to it, confessed it to God, given it over to him?

I wonder, which way do you think is safer? To push it under the rug or to bring it before the throne? Which thief, if you like, was right?

Well, after confessing his sins, the second thief said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus replied, truly I say to you, today, you will be with me in paradise.

the one who should demand repayment and restitution, the one that we have robbed and stolen from every time we have acted in greed and selfishness, came down from heaven not as a debt collector, but as the one to pay our debt, not to demand that we die for our sins, but to die in our place for our sins.

Friends, if Jesus could say to that thief on the cross that he would be with him in paradise that very day, who does he not promise paradise to you?

[29:44] When we turn to him, confess our sins, ask his forgiveness, we are given more than restitution, more than our debts cleared and settled, we are promised a place forever in the eternal riches of heaven.

The question the Bible is asking us this morning is not are you a thief? Rather, it is which thief are you going to be? The one who made excuses or the one who asked forgiveness?

Friends, heaven is not for people who pretend that they haven't stolen or try to make up for their theft with good deeds and giving to charity. Heaven is for those who admit they have stolen, broken God's law, sinned against him and others, and trust in Jesus' death to fully pay for it all.

Take their sentence, deal with their charges, satisfy God's anger, and gain us entry into God's eternal kingdom. If you've never done that, turned, rested your trust in him, confessed your sins, today is the day to wash your conscience clean once and for all in the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross.

And therefore, out of a heart overflowing with thanks to him, begin to give back what you've taken and restore what you've broken. Let's pray for that work of God in our hearts.

[31:20] Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you that you call us to yourself not to bring down the iron rod of judgment, but to receive your grace, mercy, and help.

For, Lord, we are needy. Whatever we have, however rich or poor we are, we are needy of your forgiveness and grace. Have mercy on us, we pray. We pray, Lord, that whoever we are, you would convict us of our sins, that, Lord, we would know that we have offended you, but we would know all the more that where sin abounds, your grace abounds, even more so.

So, Father, cleanse us, we pray, forgive us, we ask. Help us to honour one another by honouring what you have given us, and help us, Father, to emulate that church that served one another, received what they had gladly, and gave to others generously for your glory and not our own.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. As we respond, we're going to sing from Psalm 104, a psalm that praises and celebrates God for all his good provision, sustaining love in creation.

Let's stand together as we praise him. .