

## The Christian Life (13): The Eighth Commandment

The eighth commandment addresses the sanctity of personal property. "Its end or design is the preservation of the property of possessions which God has given to every one for the support of life" (Ursinus).

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The eighth commandment pertains to the possessions of our neighbor. The heaven and the earth are the Lord's. "The world is Mine, and the fulness thereof" (Ps.50:12); "The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord's; but the earth hath He given to the children of men" (Ps.115:16). It is not true that everyone has an equal right to, and would equally enjoy each portion of, this world. However, just as God apportioned Canaan to Israel by lot, He likewise gives everyone his portion in this world, giving the one a greater portion than the other. That portion he will have – no more and no less. Man must be satisfied with this portion and expect it from the lord by the means which have been ordained to that end. God has therefore expressly forbidden the acquisition of our portion, or a desire for increase, through unlawful means by saying, "Thou shalt not steal."<sup>2</sup>

The end of this commandment is divers. First, in respect of God: that the goods which He has bestowed on us should be conserved and employed to those uses for which He has entrusted them unto us; and principally to the setting forth of His glory who gave them. Secondly, in respect of the Church. For whatsoever is given unto any member thereof, whether it be either spiritual or physical good, it is given for the common benefit of the whole body. Thirdly, in respect of the Common-wealth: for the preservation whereof justice is required, in giving unto every one that which is his own, which being neglected great kingdoms are great thieveries. Lastly, in respect of every singular person: that every man may freely and quietly enjoy those his goods which God has given him.<sup>3</sup>

### I. The Eighth Commandment

1. *Sins forbidden.* "The eighth commandment forbids whatsoever does, or may, unjustly hinder our own, or our neighbor's, wealth or outward estate."<sup>4</sup> (1) Theft. "Theft in general is here forbidden, which is commonly defined as the illegal appropriation of what belongs to another; or the unlawful use (the owner being unwilling) of what belongs to another, whether by treachery or violence" (Turretin).<sup>5</sup> "To steal means to appropriate unlawfully another's property, or in any way whatever to bring into our possession what belongs to our neighbor" (Thelemann).<sup>6</sup> Godefridus Udemans (1581-1649) suggested several kinds of theft: "(a) *Plain theft* is when someone robs someone secretly and/or against his will, whether of money, jewels, livestock, property, or other goods." "(b) *House theft* is done with force, particularly at night. The owner may defend himself according to divine and human laws." "(c) *Country theft* is defrauding one's country of revenue or property. This includes deception in income taxes, tools, licenses, and property taxes on houses, fields, or livestock. This sin disobeys the eighth commandment as well as the fifth commandment, for we must render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's

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<sup>1</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 595

<sup>2</sup> Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:215

<sup>3</sup> James Usher, *Body of Divinity*, 258

<sup>4</sup> Shorter Catechism, Q.75

<sup>5</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:123

<sup>6</sup> Otto Thelemann, *An Aid to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 392

(Matt.22:21)."<sup>7</sup> John Calvin suggested three kinds of stealing: "Some engage in secret fraud when they amass the substance of others by subtle means and practices; others use force, which is properly called robbery; some use an even greater coverup, for it appears that they have taken nothing; you cannot accuse them before the world; but insofar as they do not live in simplicity and righteousness, they are thieves in God's eyes."<sup>8</sup>

Q. What does the forbidding of theft necessarily suppose? A. That there are distinct rights and properties among men, which cannot be justly invaded or encroached upon (Lev.6:4).

Q. What would be the necessary consequences of a community of good among men? A. It would destroy traffic and commerce; abolish all acts of charity; encourage sloth and idleness; and if there were no right and property there could be no encroachment upon it by theft or stealing.<sup>9</sup>

There are three evils of theft: (1) Divine, because since God is no less the bestower of goods than the Creator, whoever does not wait for these things from His bounteous hand, but seizes them by injury, greatly offends God Himself. (2) Natural, because since the distinction of property (according to which some possess more, others fewer things) is of natural right the usurpation of another's possession cannot but be a grievous sin, repugnant to natural right. (3) Political, because (the license of thieves and robbers prevailing) the public peace and tranquility (the bond of human society) is weakened.<sup>10</sup>

Another form of theft would be failure to repay a loan. "The borrower, who borrows money from others, with an intention never to pay them again, is a thief. 'The wicked borrows and pays not again' (Ps.37:21). What is it but thievery to take money and goods from others, and not restore them again" (Watson).<sup>11</sup>

This commandment is broken when a man borrows and does not repay. His dishonesty is manifest if he denies the debt, or refuses to make restoration, or takes advantage of some legal quirk to evade payment or removes to a place where he is beyond the reach of his creditors. But he is also dishonest if he borrows without any reasonable prospect of being able to pay; if he render himself unable by idleness, by extravagant living, by rash speculations, in which he has embarked the property of others as well as his own; or if, having obtained a discharge after partial payment, he does not make full restoration when Providence has placed him in prosperous circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

(2) Injustice. "The purpose of this commandment is: since injustice is an abomination to God, we should render to each man what belongs to him" (Calvin).<sup>13</sup> Failure to pay just wages or to take advantage of the poor and needy is unjust and thus a form of stealing. "We must give every one their due. The natural conscience dictates this, however little it is regarded; and God's word confirms it (Rom.13:7). If you do it not, ye rob them, or steal from them. In whatever relation ye stand to them, as masters, servants,

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<sup>7</sup> Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, 432

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Sermon on the Ten Commandments*, 187

<sup>9</sup> James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 331

<sup>10</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:123

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 166

<sup>12</sup> John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:478

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.45

neighbors, or under any particular bargain with them, or obligation to them, give them what is due to them" (Boston).<sup>14</sup> Thus, the eighth commandment forbids any inequality or injustice done towards our neighbor. "He is a thief, who withholds what ought to be in his neighbor's possession; as well as he, who takes from him what he has formerly possessed" (Hopkins).<sup>15</sup>

Q. What ends should we propose to ourselves, in endeavoring to further, or increase, our own outward estate? A. That we may honor the Lord with our substance (Prov.3:9); live comfortably ourselves (Ecc.5:19); and be useful to others (Eph.4:28).

Q. By what means should we procure and further the wealth and outward estate of others? A. By exercising justice and righteousness towards all (Ps.15:2); and by relieving the wants and necessities of those who stand in need of our charity (1Jn.3:17).

Q. What is the rule and standard of that justice and righteousness we should exercise towards all men? A. That we so deal with others, as we would have them deal with us, if we were in their place or condition; or, that we should never do that to another, which, if we were in the other's place or circumstance, we would reckon to be unjust (Matt.7:12).<sup>16</sup>

Over the past 20 years, there's been a growing interest in what's referred to as social justice. This refers to the promotion of justice within society. Advocates of social justice maintain it's a necessary purpose of the church to labor to create social equality within the world, and to combat or correct all "perceived" injustice in society. For example, Tim Dearborn (an advocate for social justice) said, "For Christians, the pursuit of social justice for the poor and oppressed is the decisive mark of being people who submit to the will and way of God."<sup>17</sup> (a) The NT church never sought to remedy perceived injustices within society. The Roman society into which most first century Christians lived was filled with all manner of actual social injustices, and yet not a single NT book addresses these issues as a matter for the church to correct. (b) The church is to foremostly promote justice and equity within the body of Christ. Most of the texts used by social justice advocates are OT texts that exhort Israel to act justly toward herself (Mic.6:8). But such texts say nothing about Israel correcting the social injustices within the pagan nations around her. (c) The church is to teach its members to live just and righteous lives within the world. We must "let our light so shine before men, that they see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven" (Matt.5:16). But this is different from saying it's the church's responsibility to remedy all perceived social injustice in society. Christians should live justly, and this justice should spread as far as their influence spreads.

(3) Manstealing. "He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death" (Ex.21:16). "The law is made for...murderers of fathers and mothers (5<sup>th</sup>), manslayers (6<sup>th</sup>), fornicators and sodomites (7<sup>th</sup>), menstealers (8<sup>th</sup>), liars and perjurers (9<sup>th</sup>)" (1Tim.1:8-10). "The theft of persons is a heinous sin punished by the Law of God with death (Ex.21:16; Deut.24:7), being so much worse than the theft of goods, as the persons of men are better than they (Matt.6:25). And this is committed by such as steal men or children, to sell them for slaves; and by lustful or covetous wooers, who steal men's daughters to make them their wives" (Usher).<sup>18</sup> G. Voetius (1589-1676) referred to two instances

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:288

<sup>15</sup> Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:492

<sup>16</sup> James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 329

<sup>17</sup> Tim Dearborn, *Reflections on Advocacy and Justice*, 4

<sup>18</sup> James Usher, *Body of Divinity*, 266

of manstealing: "Stealing children, who were robbed from their parents with the aim of using them as beggars; and stealing in the form of slavery, a widespread trend in the East and West Indies."<sup>19</sup> "In the Old Testament, people who could provide a service were sold like cows and horses. According to God's law, a thief of servants had to pay for them with his life. 'If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and makes merchandise of him, or sells him; then that thief shall die; and you shall put away evil away from among you' (Deut.24:7)" (Udemans).<sup>20</sup> Thus, manstealing must be distinguished from certain forms of slavery or servitude. "Slavery did occur in Israel, even with Yahweh's approval. But the slaves were foreigners who were among the spoils of war or who had been obtained in a foreign country. The law contained provisions which—surely compared to situations elsewhere—were designed to make the life of a slave bearable (Ex.21:16; Deut.23:15-16)" (Douma).<sup>21</sup>

(4) Dishonesty. "Dishonest scales are an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is His delight" (Prov.11:1). "He who uses false wights and measures steals from others what is their due. 'The balances of deceit are in his hand' (Hos.12:7). By making their weights lighter, men make their accounts heavier. He steals in selling who puts excessive prices on his commodities. He takes thrice as much for an article as it cost him, or as it is worth. To overreach others in selling, is to steal money from them. 'Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbor, neither rob him' (Lev.19:13)" (Watson).<sup>22</sup> "To theft belong also all deceits, frauds, and overreaching in contracts, measures, weights, monies, and all evil arts and trickery by which another's property is appropriated" (Turretin).<sup>23</sup> "When a merchant overcharges for his merchandise, or when he sells it in an underhanded way, knowing that no one will be able to catch him, people don't consider that stealing. In any event, the man is a thief regardless whether anyone condemns him" (Calvin).

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We don't have to go to a theologian or a great scholar to be shown that we have been wronged; we each readily know that. Still we don't think of that as a form of stealing and hardly acknowledge it. Whatever the case, God will not neglect to judge as a thief anyone who has taken advantage of a simple man, or has sold him goods in an underhanded way, seeing that he has outwitted him through a fault of judgment. Anyone who also overcharges an illiterate person is equally a thief.<sup>25</sup>

What is required in just selling? First, in respect of the person: that he be the just owner, or by him appointed to sell in his right. Secondly, in respect of the goods: that it be saleable and not base or corrupt in respect of the substance. Thirdly, in respect of use: that it be profitable for necessity of life, or for ornament and delight. Fourthly, in respect of the manner of selling: that it be without any deceit. Fifthly, that it be sold in a just and equal price, according to the worth; respect being had both to the use of the thing itself, and also to the necessary pains and danger which the seller has been at in getting of it.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 287

<sup>20</sup> Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, 433

<sup>21</sup> J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 288

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 165

<sup>23</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:124

<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, *Sermon on the Ten Commandments*, 188

<sup>25</sup> John Calvin, *Sermon on the Ten Commandments*, 188

<sup>26</sup> James Usher, *Body of Divinity*, 268

2. *Duties required.* "The eighth commandment requires the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others."<sup>27</sup> "As in every negative is implied a positive, so while stealth or theft is here forbidden, the contrary is required, namely, the procuring and furthering of our own and others' welfare in these things, but by means only that are lawful" (Boston).<sup>28</sup> (1) Frugality. "The eighth commandment requires frugality in managing the affairs of our calling, and a moderate endeavor to recover our own when wrongfully detained from us. By 'frugality in managing the affairs of our calling' is meant prudence and moderation in our expenses, so as to be sure always to spend within our incomes (Prov.31:16)" (Fisher).<sup>29</sup> Those who intentionally and regularly live outside of their means are thieves. "Unthriftiness and wastery ordinarily go together; for readily they that have no hands to gather, have two to scatter; and they that can do no good to get, are active at putting away" (Boston).<sup>30</sup>

Do we want to be free of stealing? Then greed must be put under, that is to say, the desire to aggrandize ourselves. And in order for us to do this, let us learn to be content with our present condition. For whoever does not have a specific pattern or rule will always be troubled by covetousness; his affections will drive him from place to place, so much so that he will never know any peace, or be able to say, 'It is enough for me to stay within my bounds.' I maintain that the condition which God has given every man must be looked upon as if it were the terminus for saying, 'Behold your God intends for you to be satisfied with what He has given you. Be content. If you don't you will not only upset the human order, but you will defy your God as if you were making war against Him.'<sup>31</sup>

(2) Diligence. "This commandment requires proper diligence and industry so as to secure a competence for ourselves and families, that we may not through our own default expose ourselves and them to those straits which are the consequence of sloth and neglect" (Pink).<sup>32</sup> "They are guilty of theft in the sight of God who devote themselves to indolence and depraved ease (which is the cushion of the devil) and who, in their callings, professions and ministries, are negligent and unfaithful—who unjustly steal the wages allowed them, performing lazily and imperfectly the work entrusted to them" (Turretin).<sup>33</sup> "Sluggards rob themselves, for lazy hands result in poverty, while the hands of the diligent bring in riches. As Proverbs 20:4 says, 'The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing'" (Udemans).<sup>34</sup> "If a servant wastes his master's goods, he is a thief. If a working man only asks for his daily wages and nevertheless loves to beg, certainly he is a thief as anyone can tell" (Calvin).<sup>35</sup> "Idle and lazy persons are guilty of stealth two ways. They wrong them that have, being without necessity a burden to them. They wrong others that are really poor and unable to help themselves; for they rob them at least in part of what they should get" (Boston).<sup>36</sup>

We must not be more concerned about temporal goods than God allows. This vice is the sister of greed and will be punished (Matt.6:25). But we should take care that in seeking to avoid this vice we do not fall into filthy laziness or dishonest superstition, as some

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<sup>27</sup> Shorter Catechism, Q.74

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:286

<sup>29</sup> James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 328

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:294

<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, *Sermon on the Ten Commandments*, 192

<sup>32</sup> A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 39

<sup>33</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:123-124

<sup>34</sup> Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, 449

<sup>35</sup> John Calvin, *Sermon on the Ten Commandments*, 191

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:296

people do. This vice is no less wrong than greed and will be severely punished (Prov.6:6; 1Tim.5:8). To get the balance right in our regard for temporal things, we should follow the rule of God's commandment, endeavoring to have neither more nor less than what He has entrusted to us.<sup>37</sup>

The Bible says there are two legitimate ways in which we may obtain property. (1) One is by inheritance (Num.36:7-9; 2Cor.12:14; Eph.4:28; Phil.4:18). (2) The other way is by our own labor. 'Let him that stole steal no more, but rather let him labor, working with his own hands the thing which is good' (Eph.4:28). Wealth obtained in either of these two ways is no evil. People often say that money is the root of all evil. But the Bible says that the *love* of money is the root of all evil. If we secure our money in either of these two ways, and if we value our money only as a means to serve God, then wealth itself is a blessing. 'Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks and look well to they herds... and thou shalt have goats' milk enough for thy food, for the food of thy household, and for the maintenance for thy maidens' (Prov.27:23,27). It is only when we work diligently in order to secure adequate wealth that we will be able to fulfill our obligations.<sup>38</sup>

(3) Benevolence. "Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need" (Eph.4:28). Thomas Boston said charity is to be given: "(a) Out of conscience towards God, and a design to honor Him (Prov.3:9); (b) with an honorable regard to the poor, either as Christians and members of the same mystical body of Christ, or at least as of the same blood with ourselves, and not with contempt and shaming of them (1Cor.11:22); (c) cheerfully and freely, not grudgingly and as by constraint (1Cor.9:7); (d) according to the measure of what the Lord has given unto us (1Cor.16:2); so the more we have, the more we ought to give."<sup>39</sup>

Q. Is relieving the necessities of the poor a duty required in this commandment? A. Yes; because it is a furthering the outward estate of our neighbor who is in want.

Q. Why should we relieve the necessities of the poor? A. Because, 'He that has pity upon the poor, lends to the Lord; and that which he has given, will He pay him again' (Prov.19:17).

Q. Who are the proper objects of charity? A. All who are in real poverty and want and are not able to work; especially those 'who are of the house of faith' (Gal.6:10).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, 424

<sup>38</sup> G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 2:67-68

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:292

<sup>40</sup> James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 330