

Thou Shall Not Steal

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 October 2024

Preacher: Chris Oswald

[0 : 00] You're listening to a sermon recorded at Providence Community Church, Truth and Beauty in Community. If you are in the Kansas City area, please consider joining us in person next Sunday.

We meet in Lenexa, Kansas at 10 a.m. every Lord's Day. Until then, we pray that as you open your Bibles, the Lord will open your heart to receive His Word.

This is the moment where I reveal that I don't ever preach live, it's always lip-synced. And they play the wrong track this time, and I got busted. Kids, you're dismissed. If I didn't say that, I was a little taken aback.

And Exodus 20.15 is our text today. Exodus 20.15 simply says, Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not steal. Now, we're at a certain point in the Decalogue, in the Ten Commandments, where a good question to ask, we haven't asked yet, is, what do we make of the relative agreement that we find across all cultures on these subjects of murder, theft, adultery, so on and so forth?

You understand what I'm asking? I'm asking, why is it that we could go to really any time, any place, any culture, and for the most part, with the exception of some freak societies, for the most part, everybody would find these five commandments to be agreeable.

[1 : 28] And we would probably find more unity on the appropriateness of these commandments than we might find on almost anything else. What's going on here? Well, Thomas Aquinas was a great theologian when it came to kind of looking at the Aristotelian concepts of nature and logic and sort of processing Aristotle through sort of a, what does the Bible say, kind of a lens.

Aquinas was therefore big on natural law. And I would agree with him when he said that the Ten Commandments are the things which the reason, the natural reason of every man of its own accord at once judges not be done.

We would look at the violations included from commandment number 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 and say as a reasonable human being, no particular faith alignment, we would say that natural law, the way things are ordered, tell us that these things are wrong.

So again, I'm answering the question, why is it that we would find essentially unilateral agreement on these principles across all cultures with obvious exceptions and so forth?

And it is because I believe that what we see in the Ten Commandments is simply the revelation of the way things are. This is simply just the outline of natural law.

[2 : 59] You see, the world is ordered in particular ways, and we readily acknowledge that when it comes to the physical laws that govern the universe. But I think that really forever, most people have believed that the law was, the world was also governed by particular moral laws.

And these are simply the way things are meant to work, the way life is meant to go. You know, Dorothy Sayers was this incredibly impressive intellectual around C.S. Lewis' time.

And I share this probably once a year with you. I think it's just key. She talked about this idea that there are two kinds of laws. And the one kind of law she calls the law of the stop sign.

The law of the stop sign is when man, in whatever civil, you know, kind of organization they might find themselves in, realizes that they need to write a law to change behavior of some kind.

The thing about the law of the stop sign is, is that you can always revoke it, you could change it, you could modify it, and most importantly, to our point, you can break it. You can break the law of the stop sign.

[4 : 08] But then she says there's a second kind of law, and that is the law of the fire. In contrast, she writes, laws, fire laws, are inherent laws of nature that are discovered rather than created.

These laws, like gravity and inertia, cannot be altered by human intervention. And attempts to defy them will inevitably result in consequences. You can break the law of the stop sign and face no consequences.

But if you attempt to break a natural law, you will simply break yourself against it. That's what Dorothy Sayers was getting at. And so if we're going to observe this sort of universal agreement of the nature of the Ten Commandments, we have to have an explanation for why.

And the most common historic explanation has been that there is, in fact, a natural order, a natural law to the universe. Just as the law of gravity is a real thing, so are these moral laws.

And what you find across all time and civilizations and so forth is simply the discovery or the noticing of the way the world is meant to run. And one of the greatest examples of that is the commandment that we're looking at today, which is, thou shalt not steal.

[5 : 20] All you need to know about this and its natural origin is, all you need to do is just have someone steal from you. And you'll know immediately something's wrong.

Something isn't right right now. These laws are just the way that they are. Now, one of the things that we see in this sort of Aquinas perspective is that what we ought to do is we ought to read both books.

We talked about that last week. Francis Bacon said that God wrote two books. He wrote The Natural World and then he wrote the Bible. We need to get better at reading both books. And one of the things that we'll do when we read both books well, we look at the way that the world actually runs, is we will order our lives as rational beings in coherence to and harmony with the way the world was built to run.

Right? So that's really what's happening when we look at these Ten Commandments is we're ordering ourselves according to the way the world is actually built. Now, when it comes to ordering ourselves, we have three kinds of ways of interacting with truth.

And that is applying it to ourselves, applying it to our interactions with others, and applying it to God. So today we're going to talk about this commandment, thou shalt not steal, and we're going to simply talk about three areas.

[6 : 37] Number one, stealing from yourself. Number two, stealing from others. And number three, stealing from God. Now, when it comes to stealing from yourself, that is not a category I would have had in my mind at all.

One of the things I love so much about reading, like this 17th century literature and all that, is that, you know, the self-esteem thing wasn't a thing. They were not reacting to it or embracing it.

They had a very reasonable perspective of self. They shunned self-humility. They didn't feel like they needed to tear themselves down to gain entrance into some level of social acceptability.

They were confident without being cocky. And one of the ways that they manifested this as they processed God's truth was they were able to ask, like, how do I violate this or that command against myself?

Something that some people would be in a hurry to think of. They love to think about themselves.

And some of us would be very uncomfortable thinking that way. We first saw this when we looked at the command not to murder. Do you remember that?

[7 : 37] And surprisingly, in all of these puritanical literature, we found all of these discussions of how you can hurt yourself and how you should not hurt yourself and how you should not murder yourself.

And sure enough, when we go to the Eighth Commandment and we talk about this idea of stealing, these old people, these ancient men who studied the word and meditated on it day and night, were able to see that there is actually, like, a personal way that you can steal from yourself.

And I want to present that to you today. In the Westminster Larger Catechism, it's a little bit long, but let me just read the way that they describe the Eighth Commandment. The sins forbidden in the Eighth Commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are theft, robbery, man-stealing, receiving anything that is stolen, fraudulent dealing, false weights and measures, removing landmarks, injustice, and unfaithfulness in contracts between a man and man, or in matters of trust, oppression, extortion, usury, bribery, vexatious lawsuits, unjust enclosures, and depopulations, engrossing commodities to enhance the price, unlawful callings, and all other unjust or sinful ways of taking or withholding from our neighbor what belongs to him, or of enriching ourselves, covetousness, inordinate prizing and affection for worldly goods, distrustful and distracting cares and studies in getting, keeping, and using them, envying at the prosperity of others.

And then it ends with this conversation about stealing from ourselves. As likewise, idleness, prodigality, wasteful gaming, and all other ways whereby we'd unduly prejudice our own outward estate and defraud ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God has given us.

I understand that's a mouthful. But essentially, when you ask the Puritans, how do I violate the Eighth Commandment, what are the ways in which I could violate the Eighth Commandment? [9 : 33] One would be, you're making your own life harder than it needs to be. Specifically, this category essentially would be something like this. Buying things you don't need, not taking care of the stuff you already have.

Again, on the Eighth Commandment, John Calvin wrote, We must render to every man his due. In substance, then, the commandment forbids us to long after other men's goods, and accordingly requires every man to exert himself honestly in preserving his own.

You have to take care of your stuff. Otherwise, you're stealing from yourself. And the primary expression of all of this comes down to just this idea of wastefulness. This is how the Puritans described stealing from yourself most consistently, is that you're just being wasteful.

And the main category for the Puritans of waste would be idleness or laziness. That is the wasting of your life, the wasting of your time.

Listen to what Thomas Watson says about this idea. He says, He is a thief to himself by idleness when he misspends his time. He who spends his hours in pleasure and vanity robs himself of that precious time which God has given him.

[10 : 57] So we're asking, how do we steal from ourselves? The Puritans said, it's all kind of in the category of waste. Not taking care of what God's given you. Explicitly, most specifically, most concerning would be you're not taking care of the time that God has given you.

In Proverbs 18.9, we read, Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys. Another way that we've maybe heard this verse is, The sluggard is a companion of him who steals or him who destroys.

In other words, when you're lazy, you're very similar to someone who is intentionally stealing something. Proverbs 25.28 says, A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.

What does that mean? Well, walls were used to guard a city from invaders who would steal the stuff in the city. And if we don't learn to get our hustle on and manage our time and live in industrious frugality, if we don't learn these simple virtues that had been passed on for generations, we really are stealing from ourselves.

By our lack of self-control, we're tearing down the walls and inviting all sorts of other things to come in and take from us. What we're really talking about here, just as an aside, and we need to talk about this more seriously at some point forward, is what is known as the Protestant work ethic, but should be more explicitly called the Puritan work ethic.

[12 : 29] For them, industriousness was an act of worship. It all boiled down to them seeing people or seeing time the way that C.S. Lewis saw people.

I'm going to read this quote from Lewis to you because it's one of those that I'd love to keep in the forefront of your mind. Lewis said, It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you've now met, if at all only in a nightmare.

He continues, There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization, these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat.

But it is immortals with whom we joke, work with, marry, snub, and exploit. Immortal horrors or everlasting splendors. Lewis is just telling us there, you've never met an ordinary person.

People are unique. They're immortal. They're special. And what Lewis thought of people, the Puritans thought of us with time. The Puritan motto would be this. There are no unimportant moments.

[13 : 50] There are no unimportant moments. Every moment of every day is pregnant with possibility. They sought to live with a kind of sober-minded happiness as they looked at each minute and tried to do something like what Kipling describes, is to fill every minute with 60 seconds run.

They were frugal people. They were industrious people. They were typically wealthy people. They were typically intellectual people. They were quite sensuous in their marriage beds and so on and so forth.

But a lot of what came down to the civilization we now live in came down to people who looked at a minute as a treasure and looked at each minute as a treasure and didn't look at their calendar and say there is dead time, time to waste, time to spend.

No, they counted every minute. And in that way, they did not steal from themselves. So that's one idea. In order to not steal from ourselves, we have to watch waste, waste of all kinds.

We take care of the things we've been given. We don't need to go excessively above and beyond that which we currently have. And more importantly, we need to be super careful with our time. So how do we avoid stealing from others?

[15:11] Well, this is obviously probably the thing you would think if you saw Exodus 20, 15, is about stealing from others. And man, I want you to see that this is wrong because, as Lewis said, there are no ordinary people.

There are only people created in God's image whom God has bequeathed, given various things that are not yours and eyes to touch. You know, I was listening to a sermon from our sister church up in Sioux Falls.

They're going through the book of Judges right now. And the sermon was on the story of Gideon. I thought you might get a kick out of this because I'd never heard this. And it's pretty cool.

The preacher was giving sort of comparisons between Moses and Gideon and showing how similar they were. They're both sort of hiding from the problem. God approaches both of them with a specific call to deliver his people from a great injustice.

And he essentially uses both Moses and Gideon to bring great judgment on a people who were doing what? Stealing. Stealing.

[16:21] In the Gideon passage, it says the following in Judges 6.6. This is the situation that God saw. This is the situation that God chose to raise up Gideon to judge.

For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east would come up against them. They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land as far as Gaza and leave no sustenance in Israel, no sheep or ox or donkey.

For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, and they would come like locusts in number. Both they and their camels could not be counted, so that they laid waste the land as they came in.

And Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the people of Israel cried out to help from the Lord. So the image is this. It's literally every harvest time, you know, all spring, all summer, the Israelites are working their land.

A harvest comes in. The Midianites notice the harvest and just swarm in, sitting on their land, consuming all their goods and starving the people of Israel. Just theft 101.

[17:25] And God sees this, and he is absolutely disgusted by it. I think this is an important moment. I want us to understand, maybe more than anything else, just how much God hates theft.

And no act of theft is too small for God to be quite upset about. In Proverbs 11.1, it says that God abhors, one of the strongest words you can get, abhors a dishonest scale.

God abhors a dishonest scale. He abhors a dishonest trade. Proverbs 23.10, Do not move an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless, for their Redeemer is strong, and he will plead their cause against you.

God isn't playing. He feels anger toward theft. He feels anger in particular to a kind of theft that Abraham Lincoln described as getting your bread from the sweat of other men's faces.

He said that in a second inaugural. Getting your bread from the sweat of other men's faces.

Essentially, what was covered in the Westminster Catechism as man-stealing. God is especially angry at that.

[18:38] And I want to mention that because Lincoln, actually, in the second inaugural, said this.

As he was hoping that this whole thing would come to an end with the Civil War, but he did understand that this act of man-stealing had greatly angered the Lord.

And he says, Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn from the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said 3,000 years ago, and so still must be said, the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

Include that because I want you to see, first of all, how much God is angered by theft. And secondly, I want to introduce this category of theft that is essentially legal theft.

That is essentially man's attempt to change the unchangeable laws of God and make various means of stealing from others legal, which is in fact the case of what slavery was in America. It was a disavowal of God's law and a rewriting of human law to match the desires of the individuals in charge.

[20 : 08] And this greatly displeases the Lord at multiple levels, mostly because what you're doing is you're saying, God, you didn't do it right.

I know better. When you steal from someone, what you're doing is you're saying, God, you have not distributed correctly. You have made a mistake in the distribution system that you have exercised. Calvin writes, For we must consider that what each individual possesses has not fallen to him by chance, but by the distribution of the sovereign Lord of all, that no one can pervert his means to bad purposes without committing a fraud on a divine dispensation.

Why is God so upset at theft? Well, because it's you telling him that his ordering, his distribution of goods, his distribution of gifts was unwise or unjust and that you know better.

Now, theft comes in all kinds of forms and all of it essentially is a rejection of the divine dispensation. But I thought maybe we'd draw attention to one area of theft that is actually quite legal and quite similar to slavery.

[21 : 21] And this will be potentially a relatively hot take. Benjamin Franklin wrote, When the people find that they can vote themselves money, that will herald the end of the republic.

It's an interesting quote. When people find that they can vote themselves money, that will herald the end of the republic. So what I'd like to suggest to you is that the founders, if you want to look up more of this, you can read Madison's Federalist No. 10, but they were very concerned about mob rule democracy.

Specifically, they were very concerned that a whole bunch of have nots would team up and legally vote for the seizure of property of the haves. Right.

And so I would just want to say, like, why would I be against taxing the rich? Am I, is it because I'm a billionaire? No. I would be against unfairly singling out taxing the rich for the same reason I'm against slavery.

Simple, simple idea. That's their stuff. That's not my stuff. So one of the things I want to point out is that actually, as much as we agree on the simplicity and the universality of these common ideas of thou shalt not steal, our hearts are always looking for ways to redefine the terms and work it into our favor.

[22 : 50] So that's a little bit about stealing from others. Now let's talk about stealing from God. Well, the most obvious application here has to do with generosity.

Jesus says, if you've done it unto the least of these, you've done it unto me. If you've not done it to the least of these, you've not done it unto me. The most common issue in the Bible related to stealing from God has to do with a person who has chosen not to be generous.

In Luke 12, Jesus tells the parable, A land of a rich man produced plentifully. And he thought to himself, what shall I do? For I have nowhere to store my crops.

And he said, I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build larger ones. And there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years.

Relax, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him, fool, this night your soul is required of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?

[23 : 58] So it is, Jesus says, the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. Now, I just want to be super clear about something.

I am just kind of, how should I say this in a non-arrogant way? There may be pastors out there who would talk about generosity with a motive of enriching themselves and so on and so forth.

If you are concerned about that, I'd love to sit down with you and have a cup of coffee. And I'll just get detailed about what I've given to the Lord. And then you can talk about what you've given to the Lord.

And we can see who's more motivated by money. So I don't feel any encumbrances in this area. It would just be illogical to feel any guilt over someone else's misbehavior when, at least in this area, my conscience is really, really clean.

I'm just letting you know that if your basic plan to accumulate meaningful wealth does not include meaningful generosity, your plan will fail.

[25 : 05] I'm just letting you know that that's a natural law. It's just a part of the deal. If you seek to acquire meaningful wealth, that's not necessarily a bad thing.

I'm just letting you know how to do it. It needs to include meaningful generosity. And if you have some reason as to be suspicious about giving to me, I'm not even asking that or giving to the church, I'm not asking that.

What I'm actually asking for you to do is just to give. And I'm asking you to do that for you. It's important. Proverbs 13.22 says, Job 27.16 says of this kind of man, Though he heap up silver like dust and pile up clothing like clay, he may pile it up, but the righteous will wear it, and the innocent will divide the silver.

Proverbs 28.8, Whoever multiplies his wealth by interest and profit gathers it for him who is generous to the poor. So again, as C.S. Lewis once said, I don't believe one can settle how much we ought to give.

I'm afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. Again, any plan to accumulate meaningful wealth that does not include meaningful generosity is a plan destined to fail.

[26 : 28] I can't tell you how. I can just tell you it will. Now let me be clear. This, again, is not a law of a stop sign kind of thing. If it were that, I wouldn't be talking about it.

This is more of the law of the fire kind of thing. And if you want to try to break it, you just need to be prepared to break yourself against it. It's pretty simple. Well, moving on from that kind of ground-level concept of generosity to God, I think that we should zoom out and talk about this more broadly.

Because the reality is, is that we owe God our lives. He is our creator, our sustainer, and our redeemer.

Our lives are not our own. If we are in Christ, we've been bought with a price. Our lives belong to God, and so do our bodies, and so do our brains, and so do our time, and our talent, and our treasures.

So what I want to do as we wrap up is actually just ask you three questions that Paul very cleverly issued to the Corinthians, who were honestly being very full of themselves.

[27 : 33] Pride is the root of this sin as well. And Paul gave three penetrating rhetorical questions that I think could be helpful as we try to grow in our generosity to God.

And the first one is this. This is from 1 Corinthians 4-7. Who sees anything different in you? Who sees anything different in you?

What do you have that you did not receive? What do you have that you did not receive? And then if you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

As if you earned it? These three rhetorical questions are meant to devastate prideful stinginess at every level. Especially the various forms of what I would call glory stealing that we commit against God.

Here's the answer to these three rhetorical questions. You did not choose to be born. And you will almost certainly have no choice over when you die.

[28 : 43] You are not the creator, nor are you the sustainer. Of any energy you've used over the past X number of years. To accumulate. To live life.

Your whole life, my friend, is a product of divine activity. So that even if you were to devote yourself with diligent hard work and say, I have what I have because I worked for it, and I absolutely believe you that you did.

I absolutely believe that that's very likely that you did work very hard. Were you conscious of the heartbeats that drove that moment?

Were you conscious? Were you able to give yourself breath? Were you able to give yourself life as you worked very hard? See, again, the biblical perspective isn't like super false humility where I claim that, oh, I don't deserve any of this.

Like, I didn't do anything for any of this. Biblical perspective is more reasonable than that. Paul says it quite clearly in 1 Corinthians 15. I worked harder than any of them. He worked hard.

[29 : 52] Though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. The truth is, is that in a very fundamental way, all the sins we commit are actually just acts of theft.

