

LECTURE 9: THE EIGHTH, NINTH, AND TENTH COMMANDMENTS

Eighth Commandment: No stealing

—WLC 140-42, WSC 73-75

[See E. Calvin Beisner, *Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1988)—excellent; another excellent source is Joseph M. Stowell, *A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990); see also John W. Robbins, *Ecclesiastical Megalomania: The Economic and Political Thought of the Roman Catholic Church* (Trinity Foundation, 1999)]

Definition of stealing

Stealing (גָּנַב *gānab*; κλέπτω *klepto*) is defined as taking what belongs to another without his agreement or permission. The only exceptions to this commandment would be in cases of war or of punishment for crime.

Scriptural law forbids all kinds of stealing, including real property, animals, slaves, or other movable property. Thieves were to make full restitution, with additional amounts added depending on the nature of the theft. The Bible also commands honest weights and measures, prompt payment of obligations, and all reasonable efforts to protect the property of others. Scripture commends hard work, earning money, saving and investing, and generosity. At the same time, it condemns the love of money (Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13-14 [same statement on a different occasion]; 1 Tim 3:3; 6:10; 2 Tim 3:2; Heb 13:5; 1 Pet 5:2).

Property ownership

WSC 74 states that this commandment requires “the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.” This requirement assumes an economic system in which individuals own their own property. Such indeed is the biblical norm. Property ownership is assumed and encouraged in both the OT and the NT. The book of Proverbs is an example of the Bible’s attitude toward private enterprise and what is called the capitalistic system (*e.g.*, Prov. 27:23-27). (See John Battle, “Property Rights and Responsibilities in the OT,” *Reformation Review* 26:1 [Jan., 1981], 6-20).

The example of the early Christians in Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32 - 5:11 is not one of so-called “Christian socialism” (see John A. Battle, “Capitalism in the Westminster Standards,” *WRS Journal* 15:1 [Feb 2008]: 1-9). First, note that all the giving on the part of those who had property was voluntary, not required for Christian communion. Second, the imperfect tense of the Greek verbs shows that the giving was a continuous process, taking place as various needs arose; they did not simply turn over all their property at one time. Third, the text itself in 5:4 asserts the private ownership of the property involved; Ananias and Sapphira were killed not for keeping their property, but for lying to the Holy Spirit (5:4, 9).

Collectivism is condemned by WCF 26:3, “Nor doth their (the saints’) communion one with another, as saints, take away, or infringe the title or property which each man hath in his goods and possessions.”

Recently, some evangelical writers have sought to make Christians in prosperous countries feel guilty for their abundance (e.g., Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 1977). While prosperous Christians are commanded to give to the poor, and not to exploit them, they are not expected to destroy the free economic system which enabled them to obtain their wealth. Nor are they guilty and responsible for evils in the world which they did not cause. Man must be free economically if he is to be free religiously and politically, and if he is to fulfill his place as made in God’s image.

The eighth commandment is a strong argument against Marxism; in its application it encourages labor, thrift, profit, and generosity (Eph 4:28).

Cf. WSC

74. What is required in the eighth commandment.

A. The eighth commandment requireth the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.

75. What is forbidden in the eighth commandment?

A. The eighth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever doth or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbour’s wealth or outward estate.

Gambling

This command prohibits, among other things, “idleness, prodigality, wasteful gaming, and all other ways whereby we do unduly prejudice our own outward estate; and defrauding ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God hath given us” (WLC 142).

Unlike investing, which seeks to use money to make a profit by performing some useful service, gambling seeks to profit from others’ losses. And the odds of “beating the house” make it a foolish use of money, harming the estate of those practicing it.

Ninth Commandment: No false witness

—WLC 143-45, WSC 76-78

This commandment shows God’s love for truth. While the terms of this commandment especially relate to witness bearing in court, the scope of the commandment is broader, including all sins and related duties of a similar nature (cf. Col 3:9, “Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices”).

Sins of the tongue are often mentioned in the Bible, and their serious nature is emphasized (Prov 6:16-19; Jas 3). The Smaller Catechism of Martin Luther is helpful in the area of our attitude toward our neighbor: “What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not deceitfully belie, betray, backbite, nor slander our neighbor, but apologize for him, speak well of him, and put the most charitable construction on all that he does.”

Christians should not only be scrupulously honest, but should avoid even the appearance of dishonesty. Note Paul's careful attention to his reputation in this regard (2 Cor 8:20-21).

It should be noted that this commandment assumes that we are in a position in which people have a right to the truth. Many Bible passages especially mention in this regard to testimony in court. We also are to support the truth by proclaiming it wherever appropriate. There are some situations in which Christians are not obligated to tell certain truths to unworthy hearers, especially situations involving war or self-defense. While examples of these situations in the Bible have puzzled many believers, they are explained by the intent of the commandment. This same principle limits the sixth and eighth commandments not to include similar situations.

Tenth Commandment: No coveting

—WLC 146-48, WSC 79-81

The word in Exod 20 is חָמַד *hāmad*, “covet, appropriate”; it may refer to either inward coveting or to outward taking by force. However, the word in Deut 5 is different, אָוָה *āwāh* in the hithpael, “covet, desire,” and clearly refers to inward desire. Thus this commandment is the only one to deal primarily and explicitly with one's mental attitude. This commandment especially convicted Paul before his conversion (Rom 7:7-11).

This commandment requires the spirit of contentment with one's outward estate, and a charitable frame of mind toward others (Prov 30:8-9; Eccl 5:10-12; Luke 3:14). Much of the drive in modern times for socialistic programs comes from plain selfishness and greed of those who think they would benefit at others' expense.

Christians are not only to refrain from coveting the blessings of others, but are to seek what is best for them and to rejoice with them—the essence of the Golden Rule.