

## THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

Thomas Watson

“Thou shalt not steal” (Exod 20:15).

As the holiness of God sets him against uncleanness in the command “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” so the justice of God sets him against rapine and robbery in the command “Thou shalt not steal.” The thing forbidden in this commandment is meddling with another man’s property. The civil lawyers define *furtum*, stealth, or theft to be “the laying hands unjustly on that which is another’s,” the invading another’s right.

### 1. *The causes of theft*

[1] The internal causes are these: (1) Unbelief. A man has a high distrust of God’s providence. “Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?” (Ps 78:19). “Can God spread a table for me?” says the unbeliever. “No, he cannot.” Therefore he is resolved he will spread a table for himself, but it shall be at other men’s cost, and both first and second course shall be served in with stolen goods. (2) Covetousness. The Greek word for covetousness signifies “an immoderate desire of getting,” which is the root of theft. A man covets more than his own, and this itch of covetousness makes him scratch what he can from another. Achan’s covetous humour made him steal the wedge of gold, a wedge which cleaved asunder his soul from God (Josh 7:21).

[2] The external cause of theft is Satan’s solicitation. Judas was a thief (John 12:6). How came he to be a thief? “Satan entered into him” (John 13:27). The devil is the great master-thief: he robbed us of our coat of innocence, and he persuades men to take up his trade; he tells men how bravely they shall live by thieving, and how they may catch an estate. As Eve listened to the serpent’s voice, so do they. As birds of prey, they live upon spoil and plunder.

### 2. *The kinds of theft*

#### **There is stealing from God.**

They are thieves who rob God of any part of his day. “Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.” Not a part of the day only, but the whole day must be dedicated to God. And, lest any should forget this, the Lord has prefixed a memento, “remember.” Therefore, after morning sacrifice, to spend the other part of the Sabbath in vanity and pleasure, is spiritual theft. It robs God of his due, and the very heathen will rise up in judgment against such Christians; for the heathen, as Macrobius notes, observed a whole day to their false gods.

### **There is stealing from others.**

A stealing away souls, as heretics, by robbing men of the truth, rob them of their souls. Stealing money and goods. There are these thieves:

(1) The highway thief, who takes a purse, contrary to the letter of the commandment, “Thou shalt not rob thy neighbor” (Lev 19:13). “Do not steal” (Mark 10:19). This is not the violence which takes the “kingdom of heaven by force” (Matt 11:12).

(2) The house-thief, who purloins and filches out of his master’s cash, or steals his wares and drugs. The apostle says, “Some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb 13:2), but many masters have entertained thieves in their houses unawares. The house-thief is a hypocrite as well as a thief, for he has demure looks and pretends to be helping his master, when he only helps himself.

(3) The thief that shrouds himself under law, as the unjust attorney or lawyer, who prevaricates and deals falsely with his client. This is to steal from the client. By deceit and prevarication, the lawyer robs the client of his land, and may be the means of ruining his family, and is no better than a thief in God’s account.

(4) The church-thief or pluralist, who holds several benefices, but seldom or never preaches to the people. He gets the golden fleece, but lets the flock starve. “Woe be to the shepherds of Israel” (Ezek 34:2). They “fed themselves, and fed not my flock” (v. 8). These ministers will be indicted for thieves at God’s bar.

(5) The shop-thief, who steals in selling. He who uses false weights and measures steals from others what is their due. “Making the ephah small” (Amos 8:5). The ephah was a measure the Jews used in selling. Some made the ephah small, and gave scant measure, which was plainly stealing. “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). To defraud him is to rob him; to overreach others in selling is a cunning way of stealing, and is against both law and gospel. It is against the law of God. “If thou sell ought to thy neighbor, ye shall not oppress one another” (Lev 25:14). It is against the gospel. “That no man go beyond, and defraud his brother” (1 Thess 4:6).

(6) The usurer, who takes by extortion from others. He seems to help another by letting him have money in his necessity, but gets him into bonds, and sucks out his very blood and marrow. I read of a woman whom Satan had bound (Luke 13:16), and truly he is almost in as bad a condition whom the usurer has bound. The usurer is a robber. A usurer once asked a prodigal when he would leave off spending? The prodigal replied, “I will leave off spending what is my own, when thou leanest off stealing from others.” Zacchaeus was an extortioner who, after his conversion, made restitution (Luke 19:8). He thought all he got by extortion was theft.

(7) The trustee, who has the orphan's estate committed to him, is deputed to be his guardian, and manages his estate for him; if he curtails the estate, and gets a fleece out of it for himself, and wrongs the orphan, he is a thief. This is worse than taking a purse by violence, because he betrays his trust, which is the highest piece of treachery and injustice.

(8) The borrower, who borrows money from others, with an intention never to pay them again. "The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again" (Ps 37:21). What is it but thievery to take money and goods from others, and not restore them again? The prophet Elisha bade the widow sell her oil, and pay her debts, and then live upon the rest (2 Kgs 4:7).

(9) The last sort of theft is, the receiver of stolen goods. The receiver, if he be not the principal, yet is accessory to the theft, and the law makes him guilty. The thief steals the money, and the receiver holds the sack to put it in. The root would die if it were not watered, and thieving would cease if it were not encouraged by the receiver. I am apt to think that he who does not scruple to take stolen goods into his house, would as little scruple to have stolen them.

What are the aggravations of this sin?

(a) To steal when there is no need, to be a rich thief.

(b) To steal sacrilegiously, to devour things set apart to holy uses. "It is a snare to the man who devoureth that which is holy" (Prov 20:25). Such a one was Dionysius, who robbed the temple and took away the silver vessels.

(c) To commit the sin of theft against checks of conscience, and examples of God's justice, which, like the dye to the wool, dyes the sin of a crimson color.

(d) To rob the widow and orphan. "Ye shall not afflict the widow or fatherless." *Peccatum clamans* [This sin shrieks aloud]. "If they cry unto me, I will surely hear them" (Exod 22:23).

(e) To rob the poor. How angry was David that the rich man should take away the poor man's lamb! "As the Lord lives, he shall surely die" (2 Sam 12:5). What is inclosing of commons but robbing the poor!

### **There is a stealing from a man's self.**

A man may be a thief to himself. How so?

(1) By niggardliness. The niggard is a thief; he steals from himself in not allowing himself what is needful. He thinks that lost which is bestowed upon himself; he robs himself of necessities. "A man to whom God has given riches, yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof" (Eccl 6:2). He gluts his chest and starves his belly; he is like the ass that is loaded with gold, but feeds upon thistles; he robs himself of what God allows him. This is to be punished with riches; to have an estate and want a heart to take the comfort of it.

(2) A man may rob himself by foolishly wasting his estate. The prodigal lavishes gold out of the bag; he is like Crates, the philosopher, who threw his gold into the sea. The prodigal boils a great estate to nothing. He is a thief to himself who spends away that estate which might conduce to the comfort of life.

(3) 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 to work out salvation in. Time is a rich commodity, because on well spending present time a happy eternity depends. He that spends his time idly and vainly, is a thief to himself; he robs himself of golden seasons, and by consequence, of salvation.

(4) A man may be a thief to himself by suretiship. “Be not thou one of them that are sureties for debts” (Prov 22:26). The creditor comes upon the surety for debt; and so, by paying another’s debt, he is a thief to himself. Let not any man say he would have been counted unkind if he had not entered into a bond for his friend. Better thy friend should count thee unkind than all men count thee unwise. Lend another what you can spare; nay, give him if he needs, but never be a surety. It is no wisdom for a man so to help another as to undo himself. It is to rob himself and his family.

### **Applications**

*Use one.* For confutation of the doctrine of community, that all things are common, and one man has a right to another’s estate. This is confuted by Scripture. “When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbor, thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbor’s corn” (Deut 23:25). Property must be respected; God has set this eighth commandment as a hedge about a man’s estate, and this hedge cannot be broken without sin. If all things be common, there can be no theft, and so this commandment would be in vain.

*Use two.* For reproof of such as live by stealing. Instead of living by faith, they live by their shifts. The apostle exhorts that “every man eat his own bread” (2 Thess 3:12). The thief does not eat his own bread, but another’s. If there be any who are guilty of this sin, let them labor to recover out of the snare of the devil, by repentance, and let them show their repentance by restitution. *Non remittitur peccatum nisi restituatur ablatum* (Augustine: “Without restitution, no remission”). “If I have taken away any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold” (Luke 19:8). Ill-gotten things may be restored by one’s own hand, or by proxy. Better a thousand times restore goods unlawfully gotten, than stuff your pillow with thorns, and have guilt trouble your conscience upon a death-bed.

*Use three.* For exhortation to all to take heed of the sin of thieving; which is against the light of nature. Some may endeavor to excuse this sin. It is a coarse wool that will take no dye, and a bad sin that has no excuse. “I am,” says one, “grown low in the world, and trading is bad, and I have no other way to a livelihood.” (1) This shows great distrust in God, as if he could not provide for thee without thy sin. (2) It shows sin to be at a great height, that, because a man is grown low in the world, therefore he will *acheronta movere* [knock at hell’s door], go to the devil for a livelihood. Abraham would not have it said, that “the king of Sodom had made him

rich” (Gen 14:22). O let it never be said, that the devil has made thee rich! (3) Thou oughtest not to undertake any action upon which thou canst not pray for a blessing, but thou canst not pray for a blessing upon stolen goods. Therefore, take heed of this sin. *Lucrum in arca, damnum in conscientia* [Augustine: “You gain materially, but your conscience suffers loss”]. Take heed of getting the world with the loss of heaven.

*Use four.* To dissuade all from this horrid sin, consider — (1) Thieves are the caterpillars of the earth, enemies to civil society. (2) God hates them. In the law, the cormorant was unclean, because a thievish, devouring creature, a bird of prey—by which God showed his hatred of this sin (Lev 11:17). (3) The thief is a terror to himself, he is always in fear. “There were they in great fear” is true of the thief (Ps 53:5). Guilt breeds fear; if he hears but the shaking of a tree, his heart shakes. It is said of Catiline, he was afraid of every noise. If a briar does but take hold of a thief’s garment, he is afraid it is the officer to apprehend him; and fear has torment in it (1 John 4:18). (4) The judgments that follow this sin. Achan the thief was stoned to death (Josh 7:25). “What sees thou? And I answered, ‘A flying roll.’ . . . This is the curse that goes forth over the face of the whole earth; I will bring it forth, saith the Lord, and it shall enter into the house of the thief” (Zech 5:2-4). Fabius, a Roman censor, condemned his own son to die for theft. Thieves die with ignominy; the ladder is their preferment. And there is a worse thing than death, for while they rob others of money, they rob themselves of salvation.

### **What is to be done to avoid stealing?**

(1) Live in a calling. “Let him that stole steal no more, but rather let him labor, working with his hands” (Eph 4:28). The devil hires such as stand idle, and puts them to the pilfering trade. An idle person tempts the devil to tempt him.

(2) Be content with the estate that God has given you. “Be content with such things as ye have” (Heb 13:5). Theft is the daughter of avarice. Study contentment. Believe that condition best which God has carved out to you. He can bless the little meal in the barrel. We shall not need these things long; we shall carry nothing out of the world with us but our winding sheet. If we have but enough to bear out our charges to heaven, it is sufficient.