

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, The Ten Commandments, Session 9, Commandment 8 – Do Not Steal

This is Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino in his teaching on the Ten Commandments. This is session 9, Commandment 8, Do Not Steal.

So we come now to the eighth commandment, You Shall Not Steal. I really do think that there is a kind of sense of a diminishing severity, or if not necessarily severity, a diminishing directness of injury involved in these interpersonal commandments. We come to a case where obviously if you kill somebody, you have done them more damage than you could do in pretty much any other kind of situation, right? Committing adultery, of course, was considered very bad, undermining the relationship, and had very strong penalties involved with it. Stealing from somebody is still bad, but as you will see, it is not considered quite as bad as some of these other things.

There does seem to be a diminishing sense of directness of injury, if you will, involved in the organization of the Ten Commandments. At least in my mind, I can see it being justified that way. But once again, property rights are something that we seem to take for granted.

The idea that if you own something, you should be able to keep it, and that your big, brawny neighbor shouldn't be able to just come over onto your property and decide he's going to take your lawnmower. No, you know, it's yours, and you need to keep it, and you don't want him to have it. So society has to have laws to keep the powerful people from taking stuff away from the less powerful people.

And we find that in ancient law codes that there was a lot of space devoted to matters of theft. Now, I mentioned how the middle of Assyrian law codes had a whole lot of stuff devoted to adultery. The law code of Hammurabi really seems to focus a lot on theft.

If anyone steals anything from the temple or the court, he will be put to death, okay? And also, anyone who has received the stolen goods will be put to death. So you steal from the temple or from the state, in Hammurabi's law code, that is a capital offense. If anyone buys from the son of a slave or the slave of another silver and gold, a male or female slave, ox or sheep, an ass or anything without witness or contract, or agrees to take charge of the stolen property, he is considered a thief, and he shall be put to death.

Okay? If anyone breaks into a house to steal, he will be put to death at the point of entry and buried there. Now, that's one of the interesting ones to think about, right? You know, so if somebody's crawling in your window, and you see it, you know, you

kill them, and then you bury them right under that window. So, yeah, they'll be pushing up daisies right there, and every time you can see those daisies, you can think, that's where somebody tried to steal, break into my house.

If anyone is caught while committing a robbery, they will then be put to death. If the robber is not caught, then shall the one who was robbed claim under oath the amount of his loss. Then shall the community, which was grounded in territory in the domain where the robbery occurred, compensate him for the stolen goods.

Oh, finally, a fiscal penalty rather than a capital penalty. But yeah, I mean, Hammurabi's code probably has the strictest laws regarding stealing of any of the other ancient law codes that we have. Ur-Nammu's code was not nearly as severe as far as the penalties go, but Hammurabi's code very clearly takes stealing very, very seriously.

Property rights are important in the Old Testament as well as they were in some of these other law codes, and it is built right into the Ten Commandments. Once again, just two little words, lo tignov, you shall not steal. You shall not steal.

But unlike Hammurabi's code, in the Old Testament, most theft is punished simply with a fine. Look at this. If anyone steals, anyone who steals must certainly make restitution.

But if they have nothing, they must be sold to pay for their theft. If the stolen animal is found alive in their possession, whether ox, donkey, or sheep, they must pay back double. So, according to this law, if somebody steals something and they don't have the ability to make restitution, then they would be sold into bondage.

Now, this doesn't necessarily mean permanent bondage. I mean, it can also be temporary while you work off your debt or whatever, but they would have to repay what they have taken. That's according to the book of Exodus, chapter 22.

One kind of theft that does bring a capital offense is the theft of a human being. And I think I might have mentioned before that there are quite a few scholars who argue that the commandment, you shall not steal, referred specifically to kidnapping, because they like to argue that all the Ten Commandments were capital offenses originally. I think that's a big leap of reason, a stretch, you know, but sometimes when scholars try to figure out what ties these passages together, they will simply just rewrite the passages to make them seem to be more coherent.

And so their principle of coherence would be that all of these things were originally capital offenses. And you shall not steal, originally, they say, would refer to stealing a human being. I don't think so, but it does fall under the realm of theft.

If somebody steals a human being, why would you steal a human being? Probably not to hold them for ransom, probably to sell them into slavery. Yeah, so if you've stolen somebody, you intend to sell them into slavery, and you can think about all the kinds of horrible things that that might involve, you know, whether they have sold them already, or if they still have them in their possession, they will surely die. This was one of the things that the Old Testament did not countenance, was somebody being deprived of their freedom, and very likely their life, because, you know, if you've got a slave that was stolen, somebody that you kidnapped and sold into slavery, they might not be treated with the same kind of respect or a consideration that somebody who perhaps had grown up in slavery, or somebody who was a professional slave, because those did exist in those days.

But one of the principles that we see, really, I think, very much modeled in the Old Testament law regarding stealing, is that people trump possessions. People are more important than possessions. Now, this is something that we would do well to learn and take to heart.

This commandment comes down pretty far near the end of the Ten Commandments. You know, we've got our obligations to God, we've got our obligations to our parents, and we've got our obligations to allow our neighbors to live, and not to cheat on our spouses. And now, finally, we're coming down to this question about whether or not I'm protecting my stuff.

You know, and how important is it that I get to protect my stuff? Well, yeah, it's important, but it's not as important as life. If somebody steals your stuff, no, you don't have the right to kill them. You know, their life is more important than your property.

Okay? And the interesting thing, too, here, when you think about it, is it doesn't seem to matter who you're stealing from. You know, in some of the other ancient law codes, if a lower-class person steals from a higher-class person, they're toast. You know? If you steal from a temple, you're toast.

But the Bible doesn't make that distinction. People are more important than property. There was no open season on thieves in Israel.

If a thief is caught breaking in, and he is struck, and he dies, there is no blood guilt. But if the sun rises on the thief, the killer has blood guilt. So, what are we saying here? So let's say somebody's crawling in your window.

You hear somebody breaking into your house. Your family is there. Your animals are there.

You have the right to protect yourself and your family, because you don't know what that person has in mind. So, if somebody is breaking into your house at night, and you kill that person, there is no blood guilt. You are not liable.

But let's say somebody comes into your house and breaks in, and they grab your stereo, your ancient Near Eastern stereo, and they're crawling out of your house, and you see them crawling out, and you say, I know who that is. That's Bill from down the street. He just stole my stereo.

So, the next day, you go marching down the street, and you see that Bill's got your stereo sitting out front with a price tag on it. You know, he's having a yard sale. And you go up to Bill, and you kill him.

The Bible says you're a murderer, and you will be executed as a murderer, because Bill could have been apprehended. He could have been made to make restitution. You bypassed all of that.

Instead, you took a penalty and took vengeance, which was out of proportion with the wrong you suffered. People trump property in Israelite law. There's an interesting story that happened a number of years ago in Dallas, Texas, in 1995.

A young man by the name of Shedrick Babbles was awakened when his car alarm went off at 5:30 in the morning. So Babbles got his automatic rifle out, and he went outside to see what was happening. Remember, this is, you know, Dallas, Texas.

Anyway, what he finds is that a teenager is trying to pry his \$60 hubcaps off of his car. Babbles opens fire at the young man, but he misses. The young man takes off running.

He sees that there is a getaway car waiting for the young man. He opens fire on the getaway car and releases a shower of bullets, killing a 15-year-old and a 16-year-old in the car and wounding the driver of the car. A circuit court in Dallas determined that Babbles had acted legally to protect his property.

It's ironic when you think about it. Texas, which seems to consider itself, you know, the buckle of the Bible belt, pretty much ignored the scriptures in this case. According to the book of Leviticus, if somebody kills a thief, unless they are protecting their lives or their family, they are a murderer.

People come before possessions. Life is a more basic right than ownership. That doesn't, of course, mean that thieves get off scot-free.

The Bible does not ignore theft. In fact, there are a number of laws in the Old Testament regarding theft and how it was to be treated. You know, um theft is not

only considered to be an insult to your neighbors and depriving them of their hard-earned stuff.

It's also considered to be an insult to God in the Bible. According to the Bible, God not only created all things in heaven and earth, but ultimately God is the owner of all things in heaven and earth. Oh, there's this wonderful phrase that in the book of Genesis, which refers to God as the creator of heaven and earth, and there has been debate that has gone back and forth on what that means.

And yeah, the most likely explanation is it means owner. God owns everything. And we hear that, of course, in the book of Psalms that God is the owner of the cattle on a thousand hills.

God is the owner of all things ultimately, and God has the right to determine how those things are to be distributed. And a thief kind of undercuts that process. So, like modern law, the Bible distinguishes between two different kinds of theft.

You know, thieves who use force or a threat of force to take what they want, and thieves who use secrecy or treachery to deprive somebody of their stuff. One of these we would call, you know, robbery, and another one we might call burglary or something of that sort, you know. Um, somebody who is, um, is simply like sees something lying on the countertop and takes it and pockets it is very different from somebody who points a gun at you and says, give me your stuff.

The Bible views, of course, those who use force or threat of force as being far more serious criminals than those people who simply take something that doesn't belong to them. Again, life trumps property. Oppressors is a word that gets used a lot in the Old Testament, and the Bible does not like oppressors.

Typically, when we think about oppressors and the way the word is used oftentimes in the church today, we think of oppressors as the big businessmen who work their employees, and that's certainly one aspect of it. But in the Bible, armed robbers are also oppressors. There are people who are using force and threat in order to take somebody else's goods.

Blackmailers. They had blackmail back in those days, and a blackmailer was considered an oppressor. And this was considered a form of theft and would be penalized severely.

And then there are the wealthy malefactors, the people who use their places of power and position to deprive others of their rights and property. people who cheated the widows and the orphans were a big one, of course, in the prophets, that they are constantly concerned about those who ignore the rights of widows and

orphans, of people who have nobody to speak for them. Employers who took advantage of their workers were also oppressors.

In Leviticus 19, we read, Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight. This passage, this, um, this instruction occurs in the context of commentary on this commandment of not stealing.

So, taking from your employees, withholding their wages, that too was considered a violation of this commandment, You shall not steal. But let's get back to the heart of the matter. Why is stealing wrong? Isn't, you know, um, stealing kind of cute, you know, you know, particularly if you've got like cat burglars or something like that.

And there are a lot of movies the where the thief is almost kind of like the hero, or, and you're kind of cheering for them, you know, to get away with all the goods, the goods and such particularly if they're stealing from somebody who's really rich. Why should we think of stealing as wrong? What is the basic issue here? Well, the obvious answer, of course, is because you're hurting your neighbor.

You're depriving your neighbor of their property. But there is a less obvious principle, which is actually, um, emphasized a number of times in the Old Testament. The less obvious is that stealing demonstrates a lack of trust in God's provision.

So if I feel like I need food for my family, I don't trust God to give me food. Instead, I go and steal it from my neighbor. Now the book of Proverbs tells us that, you know, that you don't despise a thief when he steals for, to feed his family, you know, but there is a sense where somebody who is stealing to feed their family is demonstrating that they really don't trust God to provide for them.

Psalms 62, 8 through 10, tells us, Trust in him at all times, you people. Pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. Surely the low born are but a breath, the high born are but a lie.

If weighed on a balance, they are nothing, together they are only a breath. Do not put trust in extortion or put vain hope in stolen goods. Though your riches will increase, do not set your heart upon them.

So God says, trust in the Lord, don't trust in your ability to extort or to take from other people. Basic principle here, you need to trust in the ways that God has established for our goods to be distributed. Fundamental issue, stealing will bypass God's methods of creating and distributing goods.

True story, by the way, a little fluffy here, you can see the close set eyes, that's always a sign of a criminal. Yes, a little fluffy here was going around his neighborhood and stealing people's clothes from their clothes lines and had quite the hoard of

them. I'm not sure how he was penalized, but I suspect that he probably found himself penned up a little bit more securely.

But, stealing bypasses the way that God has created methods whereby our goods are to be distributed. How are goods to be distributed? Well, it has to do with that nasty work word, that nasty W word, you know, that people don't like sometimes. People are created for work.

Work is not our curse. Work is our way of achieving God's blessings. Genesis chapter 2, verse 15, the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden, to work it and to keep it.

Wait a minute, I thought in Eden, everybody sat around eating bonbons all the time, right? It didn't think that they had to, but yeah, the man was placed in the Garden of Eden to do work, and this is paradise. No, because he can work. And through his work, he can make the garden fertile and make it bring forth, and then he can share in its blessings.

Genesis 3:19, after sin has entered into the picture, by the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return. So, God's curse says, How are you going to get your food? How are you going to make a living? By the sweat of your brow, you're going to work for it.

Yeah. Now, the difference between this and this is that, you know, here's where it gets hard. This is where the work is a drudgery, because God tells Adam that the ground is going to bring forth thorns and thistles, and all his good work is going to produce diminishing results.

Ever feel like that at your job? Maybe, you know, occasionally, yeah. The curse at work. But on the other hand, there is no exoneration from work.

We work to produce our goods and to receive them. We continue to work after the curse, even though it gets a little harder. Proverbs 21, verse 25, the craving of a sluggard will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work.

All day long, he craves more, but the righteous give without sparing. So, the book of Proverbs, of course, talks a number of times about the sluggard and about the fact that these are people who don't want to work. And according to the scriptures, that is not the way that God wants us to achieve our needs and to fulfill our needs.

New Testament, of course, continues that very sentiment. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul talks about the fact that he was never a burden upon anybody, but rather that he

worked for a living. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: anyone unwilling to work should not eat.

God has created a method to provide for others, for our needs, and that method is through our work, our labor. Paul again, Ephesians 4.28, you get the feeling sometimes that Paul might have been a little bit of a workaholic. You know, he and Elon Musk would have hit it off really well, I think.

But, those who steal must give up stealing; rather, let them labor, doing good work with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. So, here we are explicitly. Work as opposed to taking or stealing from people.

It's kind of interesting when you think about it, you know, the idea that back in those days that the Christians would have been stealing stuff, and that's how they would have been supporting themselves. But apparently, it happened because Paul felt he had to address the question. 1 Corinthians 6:10, Thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, swindlers, none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

And so, Paul, once again, is sort of lumping together a lot of these different kinds of theft that are spoken of in the Torah, and saying that this kind of behavior is not the kind of behavior which is consistent with the kingdom of God and its principles. So, here's the thing, you know, let's summarize here. Stealing is wrong.

Not only because you're hurting your neighbor, but also because it goes against the basic principles about how God wants to distribute goods and meet our needs. So, how does this apply to us? We might ask. Because possibly in our day, you know, most Christians aren't thinking about ways that they can rob their neighbors and so on.

But let's get real. There are some less obvious ways that maybe some people are involved in theft, and maybe even justifying it in their own minds. And there was a debate not too many years ago that took place among some, well, Christian religious church leaders, and an argument was made that stealing from big places like Walmart is not a sin.

Because, you know, they're oppressors, and you're depriving them of their ability to oppress. Um, whatever it might be doing to Walmart, I would be more concerned about what it's doing to me, to be making my living by stealing. Because the Bible is quite clear that those who steal should not steal anymore.

But there are even more subtle ways. I don't have to just go into Walmart and walk out with a TV set in order to have done some misappropriation. Computer crime.

Now, this has become a big, big thing. And the ability for people to protect their online property has become a major industry. Because if somebody produces a video, well, somebody else can copy it.

They can download it and claim it as their own. If somebody puts a song on a certain sort of platform, then somebody can maybe copy that and then share it with their friends. You know, they pay for it, or their friends don't.

Or maybe they share it with 10 friends, and they all split the cost. Back when I was younger, when computer programs used to come on floppy disks, it was not at all uncommon for people to take a disk and copy it 10 times, and give it out to a bunch of their friends and say, now we've all got the same program, we can all work together, and justify it in that way. Say, well, you know, these people charge way too much money for these programs anyway, and so I am justified in taking this program.

And we rationalize this sometimes, you know. But particularly the pirating of music has become an incredible sort of industry. And a number of... When you think about the big names in the industry, they're not hurt that much by it.

They claim they are. But the ones who are really hurt are the smaller people, the people who are just trying to make it on their music revenues, the people who've got a YouTube page that they're trying to sell some ad revenue, or something of that sort. Those people are struggling because of the number of people who are buying, downloading their stuff without buying it.

And again, you know, we kind of justify this. But oftentimes we can make it... People can rationalize in a lot of ways, you know, it's kind of funny. But back a number of years ago, you could know immediately how long ago this was when I told you about stealing records.

I mean vinyl, okay? Yes. There was a Christian bookstore in Ann Arbor where I went to school. And I was talking to a salesperson one day, and we were talking about their music selection and so on.

And somebody said something about their security measures. And I said, really? So the Christian store? And you have to worry about theft? And they said, Oh, you would be surprised, probably. And they said that one of the people, in particular, they said they had to watch the pastors, the ministers, because they could justify anything.

And they said that there was this one incident where a minister had come in. They knew who he was. He'd been in there a number of times.

And he started going through the records, the vinyls, and picked up this whole big stack of 20 to 25 albums, and then just walked out the door. See you later. Walked out the door with them.

And the salespeople looked at each other and said, Does he pay for those? And one of them ran out and chased the fellow down. And he said, Well, I don't need to pay for these. I'm using them for the Lord's work.

Yeah, we are remarkably adept at rationalizing sin sometimes, yeah? But stealing computer programs, stealing music off the internet, that is theft. And it's not right, you know, because we are bypassing God's methods of distributing his goods and so on. How about sleeping on the job? Yeah, you know, the gold brick.

I read a while back about an employee of the community services board in Norfolk, Virginia, who hadn't shown up for work for 12 years. 12 years. The city council reported that it was a little bit embarrassed that no one had noticed that they were sending out paychecks regularly to somebody who had never done a stitch of work in 12 years.

Obviously, that's a little bit extreme. But there have been a number of surveys done and studies that have shown that the average person, and it seems to be worse the farther you go up the ladder, wastes a minimum of three hours out of an eight-hour day. Now, there is just so much time that we are taking money from our employers and not giving them work in return.

That, too, I believe, is theft. So, yeah, 90% of people surveyed admitted that they wasted at least half an hour every day, and the average was several hours more than that. 2% of workers in this survey admitted that they barely worked at all, and yet they were collecting paychecks, sometimes very substantial paychecks, from their companies.

And, you know, it's no wonder that companies sometimes struggle and prices are so high, right? We all complain about high prices, but if people are taking money from the company and not producing a product in return, then, of course, prices are going to go up. And so we all suffer. How about stealing from God? Okay, now here is where we're meddling.

In the book of Malachi, chapter three, will a mortal rob God? But you ask, how are we robbing you? In tithes and offerings, you are under a curse, your whole nation, because you are robbing me, says God in the book of Malachi. Essentially, what God says is, I've given you all this stuff and I have a right to tell you how best it is to be used and how you are to respond with the things you've been given. And in the Old Testament, God said,, You are to bring in the tithes into the storehouse to support the temple, to support the priesthood, and to bring in the tithes.

Provide for people within the community as well. All these kinds of ways that tithes and offerings were used. Now, tithing has become very much passé in our society today.

And when people start talking about laws that are now obsolete, they don't usually tell you that murder is obsolete, or if somebody is stealing from them, they're not just going to say, stealing laws are obsolete. But how many people are willing to argue that tithing is obsolete and has no place in the modern Christian life? Unfortunately, I've asked many. But I want to think about this and think about the principle that's involved here.

Let me tell you a little story. There's a man by the name of Percival. Forgive his parents for that.

But a man by the name of Percival. And Percival owns a cottage by a nice lake. And one day, his second cousin, twice removed, Matilda, calls up Percy and asks if she can stay in his cabin for a few months while she's doing some business in the area.

Well, sure, Percy says. Why not? Tell you what. Just send me a couple of hundred bucks a month.

That'll cover the utilities. That'll cover all the expenses, any wear and tear, anything of that sort. And of course, says Matilda, no problem.

A couple of hundred dollars a month. That's what a deal, you know? She gets to have Percy's cabin and only has to pay him a little bit of money every month in return. Now, the first month comes and goes, and Matilda doesn't send Percy any money.

So Percy calls her up and Percy asks, So Matilda, where's my \$200? You notice, Percy does not say, Where's your \$200? He says, Where is my \$200? It is money that is owed to him. It is what was agreed to. She gets the benefit of having the cottage, and in return, she is supposed to give him the \$200, you know? And Matilda says, Oh, you know, I had some unexpected expenses.

But don't worry, I'll do what I can. And Matilda sends Percy 10 bucks. Next month, once again, she doesn't send the money.

And Percy calls her up, nicely reminds her, you know, Matilda, you were supposed to be sending me \$200 a month here. And she says, Oh, yeah, gee, I forgot. I'm sorry about that.

Don't worry, I'll get right on that. And she sends him 10 more dollars. The next month, when Matilda doesn't send the cash yet again, Percy calls her up.

And this time, he is more than just a little bit annoyed. Matilda, you are using my place. You are taking up my resources.

You are using my utilities. It is costing me money. And now, how about you send me that check that you promised? And Matilda sends him a check for \$20 and a nasty note telling him how greedy he is.

Well, then Matilda continues to stay in the cottage. Percy decides it's time that he goes and checks up on things. So, he heads out to the cottage, and he finds that there is a big, brand-new Cadillac sitting out in front of the house.

And Matilda comes out, and she is all dressed up to the nines, and her hair has been done so nicely. And Percy says, well, gee, it looks like you're doing pretty well to me, Matilda. And she says, well, you know, with all my expenses, you know, I can barely make ends meet.

And here you are showing up here, and you're going to demand money from me. What is the bottom line here? The bottom line here is that Matilda is a thief, a thief. And yet her attitude is so similar to that of many people who enjoy all the wonderful blessings that God gives to us and yet refuse to support God's work and who think and become resentful and angry if maybe the minister reminds them that tithing is a biblical principle and a discipline that all Christians are called upon to develop.

God isn't going to send thunderbolts down on people who fail to tithe. Though, you know, I've kind of wondered at times if that might not be a good thing. But anyway, the thing is, people are more important than possessions.

God cares about us more than he cares about our money. But of course, the way that we use our money, the way that we use our possessions, oftentimes is a good barometer of how we are living our lives and what kind of relationship we have with the Lord. So, in brief, the principle behind this commandment is to recognize that God is ultimately the owner of all things and that we are the stewards of God's stuff.

And so God has the right to tell us how we make money, how we use money, and how we share with others. And if we can do that, then we'll have, you know, more joy in life. And we will be able to learn to trust that God will continue to provide for us.

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