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AGAINST STEALING

Ephesians 4:28

One Main Thing

Respecting the property of others is one of the fundamental principles of law and government. Within the eighth commandment, God has provided for us a provision of enforcing that principle.

Introduction

Becoming the heirs of the Promise of Abraham must have certainly been an honor, as well as a blessing, for the nation of Israel. However, that did not exempt God's people from sin and temptation. The people were still a people who had shortcomings and faults; therefore, God had to institute some aspect of Law to keep them accountable to Him. These laws were a way that God could protect the sanctity of their relationship with Him, as well as promote a healthy relationship between each other. The commandment,

under consideration for this chapter, is “Thou shalt not steal.” I am sure that when those words were repeated by Moses on the mountain, the Israelites were not surprised by this eighth commandment. The theft of property, as a crime, has probably been a part of every form of law and government that has ever existed. It has, it is, and it will always continue to be a problem for any group of individuals that are living in some type of community this side of Heaven.

According to a 2016 study conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation on Crime in the United States, it was reported that the value of items reported stolen was estimated at \$13,667,503,625. These reported thefts represent a wide spectrum of items, from stolen cars to stolen corn. If you have ever had something stolen from you, you understand that the amount of loss financially is important, but isn’t usually that significant. No matter what the value of the loss, you feel somewhat disrespected and, in a strange way, even violated.

Going Deeper

Although the command from God seems to be clear, we have found a way to cloud that clarity through rationalization. Let me explain. If one were to shoplift from a department store, that action is clearly a violation of the command. However, one may use a questionable deduction on a tax form to get a better refund by rationalizing that the IRS gets

enough from us as it is. Both instances are a violation of the commandment. To steal means to thieve, to deceive, to secretly obtain or to get by stealthily." Jeremiah 17:9 tells us "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" Our heart sometimes can cloud and deceive our understanding based on the circumstances. Again, it isn't the amount that was taken that makes this a violation, but the fact that something was taken through deceitful means.

It is also important to understand that theft is not just about money. Under the Law, stealing involves the moving of property boundaries (Deut 19:14), the inaccuracy of measuring weights and balances (Lev 19:35-36), dealing falsely with one another (Lev 19:11), kidnapping (Exod 21:16), and not returning something found that is not yours (Exod 23:4). We must understand that anything taken by means of deceiving others classifies as stealing.

Stealing isn't something only committed against your fellow man. It is also possible to steal from God. The Bible tells us that God has created all things and that all things are his. As the pinnacle of his creation, he has given us the responsibility of being stewards of this creation. Part of that responsibility of stewardship is the giving back of our first fruits to God. It is God's way of reminding us that all things are his and without him we would have nothing. By withholding that portion that God has asked for, we

are keeping something that belongs to him, robbing from God. Malachi illustrated this concept (Mal 3:8–19). The same is also true of our talents and abilities with which God has blessed us. By not using them in his service, we are withholding something that rightfully belongs to him. For example, perhaps my neighbor lends me his rake to dispose of my leaves. Instead of returning the rake when finished, I might keep it in my garage. When I see my neighbor the next week outside attempting to dispose of his leaves without a rake, if I refuse to return his rake to him, am I not in the wrong? I am withholding something that is rightfully his—stealing from my neighbor. Is it not therefore the same thing for me to use my talents for personal gain, yet when given the opportunity to use it for God, refuse? In doing so I am withholding something that God gave me and not giving back to him when he requires it, thus stealing from God.

Application

The prohibition of stealing wasn't just a law for the nation of Israel. The same command is reiterated in the New Testament. Paul places it in the same category as idolatry and adultery in his letter to the Corinthians.

Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9–10)

Paul also condemns withholding of things owed, in his letter to the Romans “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed” (Rom 13:7). Finally, when Jesus summed up the whole Law in loving your neighbor as yourself, he included stealing in his conversation with the Rich Young Ruler (Matt 19:16–19). These accounts help us to understand that stealing was considered a sin in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament.

But what does the prohibition against stealing have to do with us in the twenty-first century? Not only does the commandment affect us in the sense that we should not commit the act of thievery, but it also helps do a few other things.

In our obedience to the command of not stealing, we are condemning selfishness. Selfishness is one of the greatest factors of the sin of stealing. A person sees something he wants, he takes it. There is no concern for the loss of the person from which the thing was taken, only a short-term sense of gratification due to acquiring something for free. That is the very definition of selfishness: caring only for oneself, one’s own interests or welfare regardless of others. Paul reminds the church at Philippi that when we are only concerned about ourselves, we are not imitating Christ (Phil 2:3-11). In our efforts not to steal, we are taking those thoughts of greed, desire, and selfishness captive to obey Christ (2 Cor 10:5).

In our efforts of condemning selfishness, we establish a foundation to promote unity. If James is correct in saying that jealousy and selfishness bring “disorder and every vile practice” (Jas 3:16), then the omission of such things should foster unity and generosity. Paul urged those from the church of Ephesus, who had been guilty of stealing, to stop and use their talents to help others. “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Eph 4:28). God wants to turn thieves into productive members of society by helping those who might be tempted to steal. When we respect the property of others and focus our efforts in honest work, society profits and becomes more unified. If we simply followed the Golden Rule (Matt 7:12), the number of burglaries would go down and the amount of generosity shown to others would go up.

Our obedience to the eighth commandment also helps us maintain a proper perspective on the ownership of things. Moses once said, “Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it” (Deut 10:14). The New Testament echoes the same sentiment: “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof” (1 Cor 10:26). Everything in this world belongs to God and we encourage recognition of this fact when we refuse to violate the eighth commandment. We do not want to find ourselves robbing God (Mal 3:8–9).

Conclusion

Let's encourage one another to refrain from stealing by reflecting on these two verses.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given unto you. (Matt 6:33)

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Heb 13:5)

Discussion

1. What are some ways people violate the eighth commandment?
2. How is it possible to "rob God"?
3. What must we do to prevent ourselves and others from violating the eighth commandment?