

The Eighth Word

Exodus 20:15

Although the phrase, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” is most well known because of the identification of those unalienable rights in our Declaration of Independence, John Locke had written a century earlier regarding the rights of all men to “life, liberty and property.” Thus his justification for all civil governments was to protect and preserve those rights within a larger society. And the right of property was, perhaps, second only to the right of life itself.

It can also be argued that, with regard to the United States Constitution, virtually nothing was as important to the framers as the right of personal property. The right of ownership of personal property. One quote from John Adams in that context, “The moment the idea is admitted into society that property is not as sacred as the laws of God and that there is not a force of law and public justice to protect it anarchy and tyranny commence. If ‘Thou shalt not covet,’ and ‘Thou shalt not steal,’ were not commandments of heaven, they must be made inviolable precepts in every society before it can be civilized or made free.”

So without the right of personal property, a nation will soon have anarchy and tyranny. I believe that it is a valid observation, that concerns for freedom cannot be separated from concerns for property. While there would be lots and lots of implications and applications of that in our current political debates, particularly with regard to the negative effects of socialism, I want to focus this morning upon what God has said. John Adams argued that even if God had said nothing about the right of personal property, civil governments need to. But, as we study the ten commandments, we realize that God has said much about...

I. THE SANCTITY OF PERSONAL PROPERTY.

The sanctity of personal ownership of property. The right to preserve that ownership, and the prohibition against stealing what belongs to someone else.

In the fullness of biblical teaching, we understand the ultimate reality that God actually owns everything, and that we are but stewards. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, he owns the whole earth and everything in it. Our responsibilities are those of a faithful servant caring for what belongs to God. But in that context of stewardship, understanding and acknowledging God’s ownership, you and I are still called to exercise ownership of our own earthly property and to respect what others own.

The commandment is simple, isn’t it? “You shall not steal.” So I’ll begin with the simple idea regarding,

A. The evil of stealing.

Taking what does not belong to you is evil. It is a grievous sin. Let me read a description of some of the case law that was enacted in Israel.

Ex. 22:1 “If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. 2 “If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him, 3 but if the sun has risen on him, there shall be bloodguilt for him. He shall surely pay. If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. 4 If the stolen beast is found alive in his possession, whether it is an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double. 5 “If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or lets his beast loose and it feeds in another man’s field, he shall make restitution from the best in his own field and in his own vineyard. 6 “If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, he who started the fire shall make full restitution. 7 “If

a man gives to his neighbor money or goods to keep safe, and it is stolen from the man's house, then, if the thief is found, he shall pay double. 8 If the thief is not found, the owner of the house shall come near to God to show whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor's property. 9 For every breach of trust, whether it is for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, or for any kind of lost thing, of which one says, 'This is it,' the case of both parties shall come before God. The one whom God condemns shall pay double to his neighbor. 10 "If a man gives to his neighbor a donkey or an ox or a sheep or any beast to keep safe, and it dies or is injured or is driven away, without anyone seeing it, 11 an oath by the Lord shall be between them both to see whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor's property. The owner shall accept the oath, and he shall not make restitution. 12 But if it is stolen from him, he shall make restitution to its owner. 13 If it is torn by beasts, let him bring it as evidence. He shall not make restitution for what has been torn. 14 "If a man borrows anything of his neighbor, and it is injured or dies, the owner not being with it, he shall make full restitution. 15 If the owner was with it, he shall not make restitution; if it was hired, it came for its hiring fee."

Just reading those verses, you see a few of the broader implications of this commandment. It is your duty to protect and preserve the personal property of others.

So...applications for us. Shoplifting. Borrowing an item but not giving it back. Taking something from your parents, children. Or taking something from your brother or sister. Taking items from hotels, or from your employer. Software or download piracy or other copyright infringements. The list should include cheating on your taxes, hiding income or finding illegal loopholes to avoid payment.

Stealing includes taking possession or benefit from anything

that doesn't belong to you. That also includes taking advantage of people. Being oppressive, which is why the Bible forbids usury, or exorbitant interest. The commandment forbids you of taking advantage of other peoples' needs or misfortune. And even in a capitalistic society of free enterprise, the law of supply and demand is not appropriate for Christians in its most extreme forms. The wicked person is described this way:

Psalm 10:7 "His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under his tongue are mischief and iniquity."

Thus says the Lord, "You shall not steal." In this duty toward one another, notice,

B. The necessity of making it right.

The biblical principle of restitution. The point is simple. If you cause someone harm, by theft, you pay it back. Often with penalty attached. Similar to the sixth commandment, this is another case in which civil governments ought to apply the general equity of Old Testament legislation. Not the fullness of the laws themselves, necessarily, but the appropriate application of the very same principles as they apply today.

One example.

Lev. 6:2 "If anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against the Lord by deceiving his neighbor in a matter of deposit or security, or through robbery, or if he has oppressed his neighbor 3 or has found something lost and lied about it, swearing falsely—in any of all the things that people do and sin thereby— 4 if he has sinned and has realized his guilt and will restore what he took by robbery or what he got by oppression or the deposit that was committed to him or the lost thing that he found 5 or anything about which he has sworn falsely, he shall restore it in full and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to him to whom it belongs on the day he realizes his guilt. 6 And he shall bring to the priest as his

compensation to the Lord a ram without blemish out of the flock, or its equivalent for a guilt offering. 7 And the priest shall make atonement for him before the Lord, and he shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do and thereby become guilty.”

Let me emphasize one important part of this commandment, focusing on those words I just read, “If anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against the Lord...” That becomes the focus of the command against stealing. It’s not just money. It’s not just property. Rather, much more deeply, it is a matter of honor.

II. THE HONOR OF INTEGRITY.

Stealing is a breach of faith. Stealing is a breach of honor. Therefore, as with all the commands, we need to understand not only what is forbidden, but what the goal is for our own lives. Here it is honor.

A. The honor of uprightness in all your dealings with others.

In other words, honesty. Integrity. When you do business, there is nothing inappropriate. No cheating. That’s the virtue of integrity. Two proverbs to illustrate:

Prov. 11:1 “Dishonest scales are an abomination to the Lord, But a just weight is His delight.”

Similarly,

Prov. 20:10 “Diverse weights and diverse measures, They are both alike, an abomination to the Lord.”

Picture in your mind that old fashioned scale, with two platforms. One is your standard. It might just be a series of weights like on a manual scale. The other platform is where you weigh out the goods you are selling. A dishonest scale means unequal weights. If you are weighing something to sell, your

scale is on the light side, so the buyer doesn’t get the full amount.

The point is simple, and we must apply it with consistent intensity. Whatever the transaction, especially in relation to the purchase or sale of property, in all your dealings with others, this commandment requires your full and complete honesty and integrity. As a Christian, you shouldn’t need to sign a contract—your promise should be a sufficient guarantee. Your handshake should be as good as your word. You shouldn’t need lawyers to arbitrate your differences—nor lawsuits in the civil courts.

I am not saying that, as Christians, you are never permitted to pursue any legal recourse, becomes sometimes the civil government needs to be involved to protect your rights. But what I am saying is that for you, as a Christian, whenever you do business with others, the honor of your uprightness ought to be the governing principle. The honor of your integrity should be of greatest importance!

Which goes along with,

B. The honor of a commitment.

You make a promise, you keep your promise. You make an agreement, you keep your agreement. Listen to the description of the godly man who is prepared to worship the Lord:

Psalms 15:1 “O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? 2 He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart; 3 who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend; 4 in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the Lord; who swears to his own hurt and does not change; 5 who does not put out his money at interest and does not take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.”

All of those characteristics deal with this eighth commandment, but my point here is verse 4, “who swears to his own hurt and does not change.” He swears to his own hurt, to his own detriment. If he makes a promise, he keeps it, even if it is not to his advantage.

The honor of a commitment. I’m not talking about sinful vows, or promises to do things that are sin. I’m not talking about personal resolutions so much, but most especially about business transactions. Dealings with one another that have to do with property. Contracts.

Beloved, it is to your honor to keep your word when you make such commitments.

Let me end with two specific aspects of the positive duties embedded in this commandment. In other words, this commandment as it is demonstrated in the life of a Christian. As I have emphasized with all the commandments, this law was not given by God as the means by which his people would be saved. It was given to his people after he had made them his people, after he redeemed them and delivered them out of Egypt. In the context of the New Covenant then, these commands become the definition of the new man. The new creature in Christ, the Christian. These commandments describe what the Christian should be like, by the working of God’s grace in his life. They describe our calling as Christians.

So what is,

III. THE CALLING OF THE NEW MAN.

Eph. 4: 28 “Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.”

You see, this commandment does not simply require that you

stop stealing. That’s the old man that must be put off, to be sure. But what is to be put on? The virtue of doing honest hard work, so that you can then be able to give to others. The requirement is not simply to stop stealing, but to go all the way in the other direction.

Stop stealing and go to work, “that he may have something to give him who has need.” You haven’t fully kept the commandment until you have reached that point.

A. The calling of generosity.

So you haven’t fully kept this eighth commandment until you start giving. The Scripture is plain in that regard, isn’t it?

Mal. 3:10 “Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.”

In that context, the prophet even speaks about stealing from God, robbing God.

Mal. 3:8 “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. 9 You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.”

So just as the seventh commandment requires purity and honor in marriage, the eighth commandment requires generosity in all our dealings with one another. Along with hard work.

Our Children’s Catechism has a great answer for this question, even though it was written for very young children. “What does the eighth commandment teach us?” Answer: To be honest and industrious. We have looked at honesty, and here my point is,

B. The calling of industriousness.

So what does it mean to be industrious. It means that you work hard. In the words of Scripture,

2 Thes. 3:10 “For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. 11 For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”

There was a day in which this is what Christians were known for, especially Protestants. The phrase “Protestant work ethic” originated by historical observation of the effect of the protestant reformation in the life of a number of European countries. In other words, the reformation of the 16th century not only reformed the church, but also society. Christians were committed giving themselves fully to whatever earthly labors God had called them to perform.

With good biblical motivation, such as,

Col. 3:23 “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”

So that is the application of the eighth commandment to your life. If you are a student, and children, please listen carefully, if you are a student, this commandment requires you to be the best student that you are capable of being. To work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men. So if your mother or father has to urge you to work harder and to study more faithfully, then you are breaking this commandment! Thankfully, your parents aren’t going to literally apply that verse from 2 Thessalonians, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”

But in the big picture of life, that principle is a valid definition of our responsibilities. The calling of industriousness. The willingness to work hard, to do whatever work is needed to be done, to avoid any appearance of laziness or indolence. So idleness becomes a violation of this command as well. Hours and hours at the computer might well become a violation, too. Failing to do your chores and tasks, failing to work diligently during your hours on the job, laziness in performing tasks at home. And the focus is not simply on gainful employment, but upon all the work and labor of life. As much as we might rightly emphasize the sabbath day of rest God gives us each week, the context for that day is the six days of labor we are called to perform.

In our day, of course, we all want to get rich without having to work very hard for it. That is the great attraction of gambling. Getting rich without labor. It is why there is such an appeal for lotteries. People are generous when there is a chance they will get rich. So foolishly, wastefully, they buy lottery tickets, and it is not secret that the people who can least afford that expenditure are the most likely to do it. The desire to get-rich-quick. The desire to gain wealth apart from labor, that is the focus of this eighth word of God’s law.

People of God, the Bible has a lot to say about our relationships with one another. It has a lot to say about how you are to live in those relationships. And as a root of all of that, as the essential element of loving your neighbor as yourself, we find this focus upon personal property. The stuff you own. And how you get them.

Put in the negative, it is simple. You shall not steal. You shall do nothing that impinges upon the right of ownership of someone else. And you labor diligently.

I read last week from 1 Thessalonians 4 regarding the will of God for your lives, your purity, especially with reference to sexual immorality. It was the call to self-control of your body.

1 Thes. 4:7 “For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. 8 Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

Look at how that passage continues, what comes next. The focus moves from the seventh commandment to the eighth.

1 Thes. 4:9 “Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, 10 for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, 11 and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.”

The protestant work ethic? No, even more accurately, the biblical work ethic. Whatever work God has given you to do, do it heartily, as unto the Lord, knowing that ultimately, your reward, your wages, will come from Him.