

## God's Concern for Our Possessions

Deuteronomy 5:19

### Introduction

Illustration from Smash and Grab at the Easton Commons Park

When we are victims of theft, we feel violated. When we are perpetrators of theft, we violate others. Why is this the case? This morning, as we look at Deuteronomy 5:19, we will consider some of the reasons why theft is about more than the preservation of personal property. It is ultimately about the stability of the community.

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### *Deuteronomy 5:19*

You shall not steal.

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### Exposition

In terms of an explanation, even from an early age, we have known what it means to steal. Basically, it means to take something that does not belong to us. Or to put it another way, it is to deprive someone of something that they are owed or due. Beneath this prohibition against theft in Deuteronomy 5:19 is the positive command to show love and respect for one's neighbor. As scholar John Dickson wrote, "The fundamental rationale of the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment is not so much the utilitarian aim of stable society, valuable as that is, but the inherent value of the neighbor made in God's image and loved by him. The more you value someone the less likely you are to take what is theirs against their will or without their knowledge." The apostle Paul makes this clear in **Romans 13:9-10**, where he wrote, "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

As you can imagine, theft comes in various shapes and sizes. In fact, it is unlikely that anyone in this room this morning has not stolen or concealed someone else's property. Maybe it was stealing a piece of candy from the store when you were a child. Or maybe it was downloading music off of Napster or Limewire. Back in college, I had a friend who shared a pirated copy of the Incredibles movie on one of these online platforms. He received a letter from his ISP telling him that his IP address had been subpoenaed and that he was being used for violating a copyright law, which was tantamount to theft. My friend settled the lawsuit and ended up paying over \$2,000 for the Incredibles movie. Needless to say, I don't recall him being much of a fan of that movie after that ordeal.

In his helpful book on the 10 commandments, Kevin DeYoung mentions a few other examples of theft that I think would be beneficial to list for us in order to get an idea of the pervasiveness of theft in our society. DeYoung mentions how this commandment forbid steal people as well as property. This would include slavery, both ancient and modern forms of it. It would include sex trafficking, which is inextricably tied to the pornography industry. So, did you realize that every time you consume pornography, you are support sex trafficking. You are guilty of aiding someone in theft, which makes you an accomplice. Then, there is the type of stealing that we are seeing on a geo-political scale with the Russia and Ukraine, as Russia is making a land grab by means of war. This is a form of robbery

Then, you have deceitful and unjust business practices, like the ancient past when people used “inaccurate measurements” or weights to charge people more than they should have charged. We see this today in various forms, but one of them is through predatory, loan sharks who take advantage of people in poverty by charging excessive interest on loans that the people often use to simply get by. As a sidenote, if you are struggling financially and need help, please let us know. We are here to help. There is no need for you to turn to payday lenders who do not have your best interest in mind.

Related to this idea of unjust business practices, DeYoung notes things like accounting scandals to deceive stockholders, embezzlement, and swindling. The prohibition also includes selling fraudulent merchandise or making false claims about products in order to compel people to purchase them. The command would include counterfeit money, check fraud, tax evasion and fraud.

On a personal level, this command would prohibit taking other people’s material and claiming it as your own, even when it is not done maliciously. DeYoung makes this point about things like plagiarism, which, sadly, is not foreign thing among Christians. We have seen, even recently, several preachers, pastors, and authors accused of using other people’s material without attribution, passing it off as their own. Using personal stories from other pastors as their own stories. Using sermon outlines and notes without acknowledging that someone else did the work. It’s like showing up to homemade pie contest with a Marie Callender’s Key Lime Pie and acting like you slaved over it for several hours in the kitchen. It’s a lie. You are deceiving others. Now, please don’t get me wrong. Marie Callender makes a mean pie. I’m happy to eat it. But you get my point. When we steal from others and present it as our own, we are lying, being deceitful, which is a behavior that God prohibits in the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment.

Sometimes theft comes in the form of refusing to be generous with the resources that God has provides his people. In Malachi 3:8, those who did not give to the Lord’s work within Israel are accused by God of “robbing him,” because they refused to trust Him and give their tithes and offerings as they were commanded. To be sure, these obligations were under the Old Covenant and related to the support of the Levitical priesthood. Yet, there is still a principle for us to observe here: When we refuse to faithfully, obediently, generously, and cheerfully support the work of the Lord, we are guilty of theft because we are withholding what is due.

Sometimes theft comes in the form of not working hard when we are supposed to be working for our employer. Sometimes it comes in the form of gouging consumers with outrageous prices. Whatever the form, God prohibits stealing.

## **Conclusion**

We could spend the rest of the morning considering examples of stealing, but I think we get the picture of what this commandment is prohibiting and promoting. And, if we are being honest, we have all violated the 8<sup>th</sup> commandments in one way or another. We should not take this command lightly. It is God’s will for us. It is repeated and reapplied multiple times in the New Testament. Thus, we should pay attention to this simple, clear command and learn from it.

So, what are some of the things that we can take away from the 8<sup>th</sup> commandments?

## Application

### *Three Principles Taught in Deuteronomy 5:19*

- 1) Owning personal property is a good thing.

If ownership of personal property is a biblical principle, then ideologies like communism and socialism are contrary to God's Word. Communism espouses the idea that all property should be publicly owned. Socialism advocates for things like means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned by the community instead of private citizens. In such systems, the ownership of personal property is, at the very least, downplayed, and at the worst, completely dismissed. Yet, God's Word presents an organization of society that assumes the ownership of personal property. If ownership of personal property did not exist, then theft would not be possible because there would have been common ownership.

Now, what about the example of the early church in Acts 2:44-45, which says, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need?" Is this passage teaching that Christians ought to disavow the ownership of personal property? This is a good question that is easily answered by considering the rest of the NT's witness about the Christian church.

Scripture speaks "descriptively" and "prescriptively." In terms of Acts 2:44-45, Scripture is speaking "descriptively," which serves an important purpose for helping us understand the character of the early church. However, not everything that is recorded in Scripture is recorded as a prescription regarding how we are required to live. And that is the case with Acts 2:44-45. Christians were free to sell their possessions and live with all things in common, but they were not required to do so. Later on in the books of Acts, we see wealthy people like Lydia in Philippi opening their homes and using their possessions to bless others, but there is no record that such people were required to disavow their wealth or get rid of all of their possessions. Scripture does not require a vow of poverty in order to follow Jesus. What this means is that the question here is not whether or not Christians should own anything, but rather, how will they use what they own for the advancement of Christ's kingdom and for demonstrating care for others? So, principally, ownership of personal property is a good thing that God commends.

- 2) God designs us to work hard to earn and provide for others, not steal.

I won't elaborate on this point too much other than to point us to Ephesians 4:28, which says, "Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need."

- 3) The threat of theft reminds us that our true treasure must not be the things of this world.

Consider Jesus' words in Matthew 6:19-20, which declare: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." True prosperity, our lasting inheritance, comes from God, not the things of this world. And our true inheritance cannot be stolen from us. Banks and creditors cannot repossess. Thieves cannot break in and steal it. Because our treasure is Jesus Himself.

“Life does not consist of the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). Instead, life comes from the One who came to give us life (John 10:10)!

Have you met the Life Giver? Have you found the One who wants us to find out treasure in Him? Do you **possess** an inheritance and prosperity that cannot be stolen from you?

Or are you placing your hope in the things of this world that are susceptible to decay and destruction? Why not turn away from the treasures of this world and make Jesus your treasure?