

A God who Speaks: The Eighth Commandment

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Preacher: Rev. George Sinclair

- [0 : 0 0] About five or six years ago, my wife and I and our children slept comfortably in our bed while intruders broke into our house and robbed us.
- That's completely true. We had a dog at the time who would bark at every chipmunk but slept through several intruders coming into our house through the garage and wandering around in our house and stealing things and then leaving.
- He was not the brightest dog in the world. And, you know, it was a really odd thing in the morning. My daughter Victoria, I think, was the first one up and my wife was the second one up.
- And I remember my wife coming into, and I was still in bed and saying, George, I think we were robbed last night. And it's a slow dawning on us as we realized that these things were missing. And it really leaves you, I don't know how many of you have ever been broken into or been robbed.
- And it leaves you feeling sort of violated, a little bit unsafe as well, especially when somebody breaks into your house. And so it is that for most of us, it is just instantly obvious that stealing and theft is wrong.
- [1 : 2 7] In fact, the moral teaching that you shall not steal is one of those universal moral teachings of every religion and every culture.
- And if you just take your Bibles and turn, once again, to see this commandment, because that's the sermon today is on you shall not steal. Turn to the Deuteronomy version, which is the exact same.
- It's page 161. And I should warn you today that we're going to look, because the commandment is so short, we're going to look at several Bible passages. So you're going to want to sort of keep your Bibles in your hands.
- But Deuteronomy chapter 5, verse 19, says very clearly the eighth word or the eighth commandment, you shall not steal.
- And the prayer book teaches us to say, Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law. Stealing is dishonestly, a very simple definition, is dishonestly or unjustly taking what belongs to someone else.
- [2 : 3 1] Stealing is dishonestly or unjustly taking what properly belongs to someone else. And as I said, it's one of those passages, one of those moral teachings, which is universally recognized, that it's wrong to steal.
- The problem for us is that almost instantly, because we're sinful creatures, we sort of add a couple of provisos. And we say, we sort of add a to who and a what, that there's certain things that it's sort of don't fall in that category of things that you can't steal, or that there's certain people or persons or groups that don't fall in that category of you cannot steal.
- Quite a few years ago, I had a, there was a man that I knew who believed that it was all right to rob restaurants of some of its stuff. That he sort of had a regular habit that when he went to a restaurant, he'd try to find a way into the kitchen or do something, and he'd steal a knife or some cups or something or other.

He'd just steal it under the idea that these people have lots of money and they won't miss this thing. And it's sort of, you know, if you talked about you shall not steal, I'm sure he would have said you should never steal.

But somehow or another, restaurant owners weren't covered by that. And some of us, you know, if we could sort of defraud the government, we have to be careful.

[3 : 58] There's several federal auditors who come to this church. But, you know, that sort of is a separate category. It's all right to take money from the government. Or it's all right to take money from rich people or from insurance companies.

Or in some cultures, they might have the teaching that it's wrong to steal. But it's wrong to steal from your own kind. It's all right to steal from the other tribe.

Or it's all right to steal from, you know, your parents or whatever the case might be. In our age, it's often maybe the what is also. It's a matter that some of us will do certain types of downloading, for instance, and not view it as a type of stealing.

Because that what, that intellectual property, isn't something that we sort of recognize as being covered by this commandment. But this commandment is absolute.

That's one of the things which, in a sense, is so unsettling about the commandment. It's absolute and without exception. It's a little bit like I didn't, I haven't yet had a chance to hear. I've heard many people say how wonderful David's sermon was last Sunday.

[5 : 02] And I'm looking forward to listening to it. I just haven't had the time this week. And I haven't got to, didn't get to hear him speak on murder either. But, you know, one of the things about thou shalt not commit murder is that there's no exception.

You can't kill homosexuals because they're homosexuals. You can't kill the unborn because they're unborn. You can't kill black people because they're black or white people because they're white.

You can't take innocent life. Like, the commandment is without exception. It's absolute and universal. And it's the same with the commandment, you shall not steal.

It's absolute and without exception. And our fallen human wills and our fallen human minds want to keep on trying to exclude certain people or certain types of things or property from that so that we can still say that we believe this commandment and so we can become unconscious to the fact that we're creating these exceptions.

But the thrust of this commandment is that there are no exceptions. It applies to all whose and all what's without exception.

[6 : 12] You shall not steal. It covers bank robbery, breaking and entering. Just as an aside. The very first time I went to visit somebody in jail, this is in my former parish.

And this is the Pembroke County Jail. And I went in to visit the person. And you can just imagine the surprise of another parishioner, a second parishioner who was also in jail, that had been keeping his being in jail secret.

He was in jail for breaking and entering. And the look of surprise on his face when I walked through the door with my collar, that he was in a sense caught a second time, was priceless.

I wish I'd had a camera to capture it. But bank robbery, theft, there's such a thing as intellectual property. So things like downloading in particular ways or plagiarism are examples of theft.

For companies or corporations, there can be unjust wages. I have a friend who is a small contractor.

[7 : 20] And, you know, there will be people who will get work done and then they'll just refuse to pay. Or if they do pay, they know that if they pay, let's say the contract was for \$5,000 and they'll say, here's \$3,000, I'm not going to give you the rest.

Knowing that in many cases, people aren't going to go through the bother of trying to go for the rest of money. That's theft. He's stolen \$2,000. The forcing up of prices unjustly is a form of theft.

The government can steal through unjust or punitive taxes or appropriation of land. It can sometimes be guilty of theft. Companies can be guilty of theft by charging exorbitant interest.

Kidnapping is an example of theft. And I won't keep on going with lots and lots of examples. But we see that the Bible teaches us that you shall not steal.

But what makes stealing wrong? It's more than the fact that it hurts our feelings or makes us feel insecure or that it might give us nightmares, depending on the type of theft.

[8 : 24] What makes stealing wrong? The Bible as a whole teaches that what makes stealing wrong is what makes personal property right. Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law.

So what is it about property that is good? What is right about private property? Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 24. We're ultimately going to go back to Genesis.

But sort of as a shortcut to it, we're going to look at Psalm 24, verse 1. In your Pew Bibles, it's page 478. Page 478.

And this psalm, the first verse, brilliantly summarizes a constant biblical theme. And here we see that the Bible teaches this. The earth is the Lord's in all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein.

Just listen to that again. The earth is the Lord's in all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein. The Bible teaches that God is the creator of all things, the sustainer of all things, and the true end of all things.

[9 : 52] And that he, in fact, is the only true owner. In fact, every time we use the word private property, really, we should do this little funny thing here with our fingers to try to indicate that there's quotation marks around it, that there's a bit of an exception or a way that we have to understand sort of a limit around what private property actually is.

Because biblically speaking, there's only one true owner, and that's God. And God owns everything. He's the true owner of this church. He's the true owner of me.

He's the true owner of my children. He's the true owner of my wife. He's the true owner of whatever my mind can think that is good. He is ultimately the only owner. God is the creator, the sustainer of all things, and the end of all things.

And God, as the true owner, is sovereign over all things. So biblically, whenever we say private property, as I said, we should put it in quotation marks.

Because God is the true owner, but as a gift, he entrusts to us, mindful of the quotes, private property.

[11 : 02] Private property is God's idea. And God has, as a sacred trust, bestowed upon us minds, the ability to work, imaginations, ability to reason, creativity.

And it is part of his good plan and purpose for us that not only has he given us the ability to work, but he has given us things that we can call ours. Always understanding that as soon as we say ours, we should put these little quotation marks above our head to understand that he's the true owner, but I am the steward of my mind.

I am the steward of my will. I am the steward of my emotions. I am the steward of my children. I am the steward of my house. And whatever wealth I happen to have, not very much, but whatever I have, I am the steward of that.

But God is the true owner, and he has made us stewards. Property, in a sense, and the ability to work is a sacred trust, a gift given to us, and we are ultimately accountable to him.

Now, I just have to give a few analogies around this, because it's a bit of an odd idea for many of us to think that God is ultimately the owner of my mind. But that's what Psalm 24, verse 1 teaches us.

[12 : 23] It's what the Bible teaches us from Genesis chapter 1 to the end of the book of Revelation, that God is the creator of all things, and he is ultimately the only true owner.

It's not like renting. The problem with renting is renting sort of passive. It's as if God has given us, you know, an area of responsibility, and he desires us to prosper in it.

It's a little bit like this. Chris and Dana Scherf, in our congregation, they coordinate our ministry to children. And ultimately, they are to serve these children, ultimately knowing that they serve God.

And secondarily, they're to serve these children knowing that under God they serve the parents, and that in particular, ultimately, that they, in a sense, are under the authority of me and the other staff and wardens of the church, that they have to, in a sense, be accountable, not only to the parents, ultimately to God, but also to me in terms of how they care for children, how they recruit volunteers, how they teach the children, how they love the children, how they encourage and equip the children.

And so it's not just a matter of, you know, well, you know, they sort of look, I have to be here at 10, and, you know, gosh, I can just sort of, you know, sit downstairs, chewing gum, smoking cigarettes, tapping my fingers, hoping for this service to get over as quick as possible so that I can be finished my task and off I go.

[14 : 00] If that's how they are acting, they are not being proper stewards. Because as stewards, they are to use their mind and their heart and their will and their imagination.

They are to pray for the children and pray for the parents and pray for us as a church and call us to pray and get us excited about this and understand our proper place and understand that they're not just looking after, you know, a few little tiny human beings that haven't reached three foot tall or four foot tall yet, but they are there to help make confident, joyful disciples of Jesus Christ.

And they should be excited and we should be excited if the number of children that God entrusted this church goes up and up and up and up. And not only, friends, the same with Nadia and the people involved in music ministry.

You know, she, in a sense, is a steward of her talents. And she, in a sense, ultimately is accountable to her and Ben and all the other people. They're ultimately accountable to Almighty God.

And secondarily, they're accountable to me in this particular case and to the congregation. And Nadia and Ben are to pray for the congregation that we learn how to sing, that we sing with our spirits, that we sing, you know, lustily to the Lord.

[15 : 17] You know, David is going to be beginning, heading up this ministry. I keep wanting to call it HOT. Hall of Tyrannus, that's right, H-O-T. He's doing something HOT on campus.

And, you know, once again, he's not just doing this to fill in time. He's a steward of this ministry. We, as a congregation, are paying money to release him to do this ministry.

And he is to pray for this and dream about this and organize around this. And he's to do it to the glory of God. He's to seek, you know, dozens and scores and hundreds of students who will come and hear the word of God and come to saving faith in Jesus Christ and become confident, joyful disciples of Jesus Christ.

You see, this is what it means to be a steward. Dave isn't going off as some lone ranger. Nadia is not going off as some lone ranger. Chris and Dana Scherf are not going off as some lone ranger.

They are under authority. They have been given a sacred trust, an area of responsibility. And God is calling them to give 110% to build God's kingdom.

[16 : 26] To build and to grow, always understanding that it's not about them, that it's all about God and what brings him glory. And so it is with us. God is the only owner.

But he, in his providence and his mercy, has bestowed upon us this great good of owning property and having the ability to work. And this property is given to us as a gift, as a sacred trust.

We are accountable to him, and we are ultimately stewards of the property that has been given to us and the ability that we have to work.

God has ordered that we are to work and to own. He desired us to have property. Just as an aside, you're right beside a university.

I can make these little academic asides. I'm going to get in trouble, maybe. It's joked that the only Marxists and communists left in North America teach at universities.

[17 : 29] I don't know if that's completely true, but you don't see very many of them anywhere else in the world. And this passage, this commandment teaches that communism and Marxism is severely wrong.

It is intrinsically wrong because it teaches that private property is wrong. In fact, fundamentally denies the tired teaching of scripture.

So communism and Marxism is in fact deeply and intrinsically wrong and is in fact spiritually dangerous for us.

The Bible doesn't teach capitalism. The Bible teaches the good of property, but there's different social systems that can develop, which are all basically in keeping with the Christian message.

But every social system and every system that tries to order property and order our common life together all has the possibility for misuse.

[18 : 32] And the misuse comes when we forget that property, private property, should always be in quotation marks. And that God, in fact, is the fundamental owner of all things.

So capitalism, or feudalism for that matter, is not inherently wrong, but communism and Marxism is inherently wrong.

I don't know if I've been controversial with that, but I think that's what the Bible teaches. And you can talk to people like Robert Hanuk, who actually had to live under communism for a long time, and he can tell you that it's not only wrong biblically, but in fact creates great harm in reality.

So what is the good of property? We're going to look at that in a moment, but just remember, the Bible teaches you shall not steal. And the Bible teaches that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it.

And we are to say, Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law. The Bible teaches that not only that you shall not steal, it teaches that the earth is the Lord's.

[19 : 37] It also teaches us that we are to be fruitful and multiply. We are to be fruitful and multiply. Turn in your Bibles to Genesis 1, right at the beginning of your Bibles.

And in fact, turn to page 1 of your Bibles. And this is the end of the creation account.

And we're going to begin reading it in verse 26. This is the sixth day of creation. And here's what the Bible teaches. Then God said,

Private property, with the quotes, is a good intended by God with particular purposes.

Now just a bit of a pause here. We're not used to, in our culture, thinking of things being a good. We're used to thinking of, in a sense, our culture right now is trying to teach us that things, in fact, it's having a bit of a struggle with it because obviously ecological movements and all have a bit of a, there's a bit of a tension in our culture.

[21 : 49] But a certain element of our culture ultimately sees the world as plastic, as being there for us to shape and to do with according to whatever purposes we as human beings choose to have.

But the Bible teaches us that the world is created by God, sustained by God, and that there are, in fact, purposes in creation.

There are goods in creation. So, for instance, I think last week, David talked about sexuality having a purpose.

It is, there is a particular good to sexuality, and there is a good way, a proper way, a God-given way, that our sexuality is to be expressed, and that is in the holy matrimony, the marriage of a man and a woman under God.

That that is, in a sense, that there is a good to marriage, that marriage is for the care and procreation of children. It's to symbolize the unity between Christ and his church. It is, you know, there's these particular goods or purposes for marriage, which are, in a sense, independent of what we want or what we desire.

[23 : 01] A good that comes from God means that there are divine purposes there, which we are to discover and enter into, rather than things which we can merely impose upon something.

It's maybe a little bit abstract for some of you. Bill Hybels is famous for saying, a very, very biblical statement, the local church is the hope of the world. The church is God's invention.

It's not the invention of a whole pile of bishops, or a whole pile of deacons, or a whole pile of rich people, or white people, or black people, or blue people, or polka-dotted people.

The church is invented by God, and because it's invented by God, it is a good thing, or it's supposed to be good, and it has divine purposes. And we are called constantly to try to seek to understand what those purposes are that come from God so that we may abide in those purposes, fulfill those purposes, grow and flourish within those purposes.

And God has given us this positive good of private property. The good is that we can engage in productive labor and enjoy the fruits of our labor.

[24 : 18] The good is that it protects the weak from the strong. Rich people can't steal from poor people because they're poor. White people can't steal from black, or black from white, just because of their color.

The poorest person in this country, if we had proper property rights, would be protected from government, or from the richest person because it's their property.

And no government and no rich person can take it with them without being guilty of stealing. So there is the good of allowing and encouraging productive labor to enjoy the fruits of our labor, to protect the weak from the strong, and provide security for us as persons, for our well-being.

Property is for the building of families and for the building of proper community. It is to be a means by which we can exercise generosity and charity.

Charity for those who are poor or in any type of distress, and generosity towards the spread of the gospel message and the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ.

[25 : 26] And not only is it for all these things, it's for fun. God likes matter. That's why he made so much of it.

And God made matter so we could enjoy it. Like fun is God's creation, not the devil's. Pleasure is God's creation, not the devil.

And he made, he allowed us to have property and to live in this material world and call some of this material world that which is ours under him so we could enjoy it, so we could have fun.

You know, Christianity is not just a whole fast after fast after fast after fast. There's times to fast, but there's times to feast. Now, these are the goods of merit, of property.

It means that if we're not, in a sense, fulfilling these things, we're doing, in a sense, we're also stealing. If we're lazy and not engaged in productive labor, if, you know, if we aren't using our money in a way which is generous and which is charitable towards the poor and others, it means that we're not, in a sense, using our money as we should be.

[26 : 43] Because we have to understand that we are stewards, it means that, in a sense, God looks at our bank records and our credit card records and, in a sense, we'll be judged for this.

How are we on the generosity scale? How are we on the productive labor scale? How are we? How have we been in our lives?

So the Bible teaches, you shall not steal. The Bible teaches that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. The Bible teaches that we are to be fruitful and multiply. And finally, just very briefly, there's a question which might never have dawned on most of us.

In fact, I was thinking about this a lot this week. There's many people in Canada who might say, you know what, that's one commandment that I've never broken. I don't know, maybe, you know, 50%, 80%, 90% of Canadians said, I've never stolen.

And one of the reasons that so many Canadians would say that they've never stolen is they've never asked an obvious question. Can a human being rob God? Can a human being rob God?

[27 : 50] Can a man or a woman rob God? Believe it or not, the Bible asks that question. Some of you might never realize that the Bible, in fact, asks that very question. If you turn to Malachi chapter 3, verses 8 to 10, we'll see how the Bible answers that question.

And Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament. And if you're using your pew Bibles, it's on page 828. Page 828.

Actually, we'll begin at verse 6. Malachi chapter 3, verse 6. For I am the Lord, I do not change. Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.

Yet from the days of your fathers you have gone away from my ordinances and have not kept them. Return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you said, In what way shall we return?

Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed me. But you say, In what way have we robbed you? In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed me, even this whole nation.

[28 : 58] Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And prove me now in this, says the Lord of hosts. If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will be not room enough to receive it.

Isn't that a stark passage? You know, all are called to give God his proper due.

Whether you are a Christian or not a Christian, because God is the creator of all things and the sustainer of all things, all human beings are called to give God his due. We understand, as Christians, that we have become alienated from God and estranged from God.

That we have turned our back on God. And we Christians are ones who have understood and heard the message that God has sent his only son to be the one to heal this estrangement and this breaking.

We ourselves cannot break this by ourselves. That we need God himself to intervene and so God has intervened by sending his son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, to pay for our sins, to pay for the punishment of our sins, to heal and restore that which we have willfully broken and that we are to come to God in faith through the person of Jesus Christ, trusting him as our savior and desiring to follow him as Lord.

[30 : 28] And when we come to God through Jesus Christ, trusting Jesus as our savior, being filled with the Holy Spirit as a gift of his grace and learning to follow Jesus as Lord, what we start to do, what God starts to do within us is heal us in our relationship to creation and all of the original purposes built into creation that God had desired that we would abide in.

that these and so that we are called to learn once again how to give God his proper due with our tithes and offerings.

I want to emphasize that the process is first to come to Christ and then to give. In fact, in a few minutes we're going to be passing the offering plate and I want to remind you the offering plate is for Christians.

Christians, if you have not yet given your life to Christ and you are with us this morning, we are so glad you came and there's going to be coffee, have as many cups of coffee as we can possibly put in you.

You are our guest and we don't want you to put a penny on the plate because the plate is for Christians. It is for those who have given their lives to Christ.

[31 : 45] We can't, in a sense, buy God off with a few pennies in the plate or a few dollars or a few thousand dollars or even a few million dollars, even billion dollars. God doesn't want us to pay him off.

He wants us to come to his son, Jesus Christ and it is through him that we are reconciled and so when the plate is passed, this Sunday and any Sunday, if you have not yet given your life to Christ, we welcome you here.

Please be among us. Please never put a penny in the plate but for those of us who are Christians, we are to heed deeply this word.

Can a man rob God? Can a woman rob God? And we rob God by not giving to him of our tithes and giving to him of our offerings.

Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law. Let's bow our heads in prayer. Father, we give you thanks and praise for the gift of your son, Jesus Christ.

[32 : 53] We give you thanks and praise for his death upon the cross, for his bearing in his body and in his person, all that separates us from you. We thank you that he dealt with our sins and the punishment that our sins deserved in his death upon the cross and in his mighty resurrection.

We give you thanks and praise, Father, that you desire that we come to your son, Jesus Christ, to put our trust and faith in him. And we thank you, Father, that as we put our trust in him, that you send your Holy Spirit to make us reborn in soul and spirit, that you and your son and the Holy Spirit himself actually make your home within us and start to fit us for heaven.

Father, thank you for the great gift of your son. Thank you, Father, for creating us and for the gift of property. We ask, Father, that under the lordship of your son, Jesus Christ, that we would be guided to fruitful labor, to a generous use of the resources that you have bestowed upon us, generous to the poor, generous to the spread of the gospel, generous to our neighbors.

Father, may your Holy Spirit work this work of healing in our hearts and in our lives. This we ask in the name of Jesus, your son and our savior. Amen.