

The Ten Commandments**Lesson 18: No Stealing****The Virtues of Hard Work And Giving As Opposed To Taking****Introduction**

Because everything belongs to God (*"The earth...is the Lord's and all it contains; the world, and those who dwell in it"*—**Psalm 24:1**), any act of theft is not only stealing from another person, it is ultimately stealing from God Himself. This fact brings to light the heinous nature of stealing. God owns it all, provides all, gives all—we have the opportunity and privilege of using what He gives; of working with, refining, and producing new products; and giving to others, but we can never truly say, "This is mine."

As Job said, *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return"* (**Job 1:21a**). He knew well that the Lord gives, and the Lord takes away, and he praised God accordingly: *"Blessed be the name of the Lord"* (**1:21b**). David knew this truth, as well. At the offering time for the Temple that his son, Solomon, would build, David prayed, *"For all things come from Thee, and from Thy hand we have given Thee... O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided to build Thee a house for Thy holy name, it is from Thy hand, and all is Thine"* (**1 Chronicles 29:14, 16**). When we realize that everything belongs to Him, we are free to use what He gives us as He directs; we're free to give to others as He wishes, and we're cautious about ever misusing what He has entrusted to us. When we have this realization in mind, we are not inclined to take anything from someone else.

The command *"You shall not steal"* reminds us that God created everything, entrusts it to us to manage, and therefore, He alone can tell us how to use the abundance He gives. God's gifts to us include our finances, our material goods, our physical well-being, our mates, our children and grandchildren. Everything is only entrusted to us for a short time while we live and we are expected to manage our assets wisely: our time, our abilities, our resources, our relationships—everything. We will answer to the Lord for all that we are, all that we have, all that we know, and all that we do.

How are we to fully obey this command? What guidance does the Old Testament provide? What does Jesus reveal about this all-important commandment? How did the Holy Spirit lead the early church and the writers of the New Testament in knowing and applying this truth? We will explore the answers to these and other questions in this lesson as we discover how to avoid the temptation to steal, how to value God's gifts, and how to give to others as God gives to us.

1. The Matter of Stealing In Moses' Day

Theft is an every-present reality in our world, running the gamut from stealing time from an employer to stealing vast sums through robbery or embezzlement. What does the Old Testament reveal to us about stealing? We begin by looking at the matter of ownership and how that relates to the eighth commandment, *"You shall not steal"* (**Exodus 20:15**).

- a. To fully understand the meaning of the eighth commandment, we must first see what Scripture says about ownership. What do you find in **Psalm 50:10-12**?

- b. As God looks over His creation, He confidently declares His ownership of all the animals, birds, and other creatures. As we often hear, He owns “*the cattle on a thousand hills.*” In **Psalm 89:11**, the psalmist praises the Lord, the Creator, the one who “*founded*” the “*world and all it contains.*”
- c. How does the Eighth Commandment found in **Exodus 20:15** relate to personal responsibility, management, provision, work, and personal property?

Like the other commandments given to the people of God, this one points to the fact that a follower of God can be tempted and succumb to temptation. God wants none of that in the lives of His people. Today, those who know Jesus as Lord and Savior have the enabling grace of His Spirit to empower their obedience.

As evidenced throughout Scripture, God’s intention for the eighth commandment deals with more than simple stealing. First, this commandment speaks about *ownership*. God makes this command from His vantage point, as owner of all, who entrusts to each a certain amount of goods to manage. We receive this command from the vantage point of *managers* of His property. If God has given someone money or goods to oversee, it is his or her *personal responsibility* and privilege to *manage* what He has given. We must each look to the Lord for guidance in using, spending, investing, giving away, or saving, for future use what He has given us. What He has given is certainly not for another to steal or for us to waste.

- This command also speaks about *trust in the Lord* as Provider. If we believe that He is the Lord who gives life and breath and everything necessary for life, then stealing is not an option.
- This command also touches on the importance of *work*—earning a living by honest effort.
- Another truth inherent in this command is *respect for others* and for the *property* God has entrusted to them. A true understanding of this commandment will lead us to honor what God has given to others and also to respect their management of it so that we would never even consider stealing it.

The Lord applied His command against stealing in many ways. One area that he chose to emphasize was the matter of daily labor and daily wages. Look at the guidelines that he gives in **Deuteronomy 23:14-15**. Have you ever needed your paycheck badly yet had to wait for it because of an employer’s carelessness in getting the payroll out? Did you realize, at the time, that God had specifically commanded employers not to treat workers that way?

- d. **Leviticus 19:13** presents the treatment of a neighbor with the treatment of a hired man. What do you find about how to treat each in **Leviticus 19:13**?
- e. Read **Jeremiah 22:13**. What is God’s attitude toward someone who does not pay workers the wages that they are due?
- f. **Exodus 21:16** and **Deuteronomy 24:7** also address stealing, but these verses discuss theft of a very different nature. Read these verses and record any additional insights on stealing.

There are several kinds of stealing. We know Scripture gives many details about stealing property, but Scripture also speaks of stealing people. In Deuteronomy 24:7, the phrase “caught kidnapping” is literally “found stealing” and the kidnapper is called “that thief” indicating his crime. Still today in some countries thieves steal men, women, or children for ransom, or to sell or use as slaves.

- g. God wants a just society in which people and their property are respected. Several scriptures contain laws and punishment for different types of theft. Look at **Leviticus 6:1-5**. What basic principles are delineated in this passage?

Leviticus introduces the matter of making a guilt offering to atone for theft. Five offenses are listed, all related to dishonesty of some sort. First, the Lord mentions someone entrusting something to a neighbor who then deceitfully tries to keep it. Extortion is also stealing, as is keeping something that another person has lost instead of returning it when it is found. In Leviticus, each of these cases is resolved by the guilty party's admitting the sin and being willing to make restitution. For anything that has been stolen (regardless of how it was stolen), restitution must be made full, plus twenty percent. Because the person has sinned against his or her neighbor and against God, a guilt offering to God must be made on the same day that restitution of the stolen property occurs.

- h. God gave several regulations regarding restitution for theft. **Exodus 22:1-14** is one of the prime Scripture passages dealing with stealing, restitution, and property issues. They deal with restitution amounts for oxen and sheep (v. 1); if the thief is caught with the stolen property in hand (v. 4); and unintentional damage to another's property (vs. 5-6).

God wanted His people living in a just society. Theft was not to be tolerated and where it occurred, proper restitution had to be made.

2. So Many Ways To Steal, And All Are Sinful

Several other passages in the Old Testament deal with various ways of stealing, some of them very subtle in nature. Now we will look at some of those passages and see how they apply to our lives today.

- a. In the Scriptures, the Lord has given clear instructions about each individual bearing his own guilt or innocence. **Ezekiel 18:1-20** presents a scenario of three individuals, a father, his son, and a grandson, and how God sees the guilt or innocence of each person. Since we are looking at the eighth commandment, which addresses stealing, look at these verses in light of that particular issue. What does God say about a righteous man and his actions in verses 5 and 7-9?
 - i. What about an unrighteous son? Look at verses 10, 13 and 18 and record God's verdict of this man.
 - ii. What about the grandson who practices what is right? What do you find in verses 14 and 17?
 - iii. In summing up these three cases, what principles does God give in verses 19-20?

The Lord made clear His standards for dealing with sin. The righteous person (someone who trusts and obeys the Lord) will be blessed with life. Ezekiel discusses the lifestyle of a righteous man, his unrighteous son, and his righteous grandson. Each is responsible before God for his own sin. A parent is not responsible for a

grown child's sin, and a child is not responsible for a parent's sin. God will deal in judgment with each person for his or her sin, just as He will honor everyone who follows Him in obedient faith.

- b. To better understand the verses that discuss giving or restoring a pledge, it will help to see the laws on which they are based. First, summarize the problem presented in **Exodus 22:26-27**. For additional facts about the matter of restoring a pledge, review **Deuteronomy 24:6, 10-13, 17**.

In Israelite society, a person could be granted a loan from a fellow Israelite without being charged interest, usually by giving some collateral to guarantee repayment of the loan. Normally, the poor were those who sought loans, and often the only collateral that a poor person could offer was his or her cloak. Dress for an Israelites consisted of a tunic covered by a cloak; the cloak provided protection from the sun and rain and was used as a blanket at night. God required a lender who received someone's cloak in pledge for a loan to restore that cloak at the end of the day so that the borrower would have it at night.

The applications are obvious. Where one can help a neighbor or loan what is needed, that should be done without charge. We are to show kindness and help someone in need when we have the ability to do so. God considers it a righteous act to show this consideration for the poor, for widows, or for anyone in need. Not returning someone's only cloak at night was being oppressive—stealing what that person badly needed, particularly on a cold or rainy night.

- c. What did God say about charging interest on loans (see **Exodus 22:25** and **Leviticus 25:35-37**) to poor and to fellow Israelites?
- d. What is the testimony of **Psalms 15:5**?

God called His people to a high level of caring for one another, especially for the poor in the land. Even strangers were given the gleanings of the grain fields and vineyards—free of charge. How much more should a fellow countryman be helped? Out of their fear of the Lord, Israelites were not to charge any interest on a loan or seek to profit from the hardship of another.

In His Word, God teaches us that we need to take personal responsibility for our lives and that we must work hard. God delights in seeing His people doing the best work that they possibly can and employing honest business practices.

- e. What does **Proverbs 6:6-11** say about work?
- f. **Proverbs 18:9**, makes an observation that may surprise you. Do you agree with its comparison of a lazy person to someone who is destructive?

The scriptures are extremely practical, advising against laziness, which is unprofitable. According to Proverbs, sleeping late and sleeping too much is the tendency of sluggards. The result is poverty, not because of any calamity or the fault of someone else, but because of the failure of those who are lazy to carry their own load. Such persons actually steal from themselves, just as though armed robbers had taken their property.

- g. God called His prophets to deal with all kinds of unrighteous practices among His people, practices that eventually brought His judgment. As an example, look at **Amos 8:1-6**, especially verses 4-6. Of what were the Israelites guilty?

- h. Read **Proverbs 11:1**. What word is used to describe the way God views dishonest business practices?
- i. **Malachi 3:8-12** relates God's command and His promise concerning tithes and offering. What does God say about stealing in this passage? What is the promised reward for giving Him "the whole tithes" (verse 10)?

When we consider the many laws given in Scripture against stealing, failure to return pledges, charging interest, and using dishonest business practices, it is obvious that God is far more concerned about people than about mere material matters. He deals with stealing because stealing affects people in many hurtful ways. He also deals with it because of our need to properly manage the goods and gifts that He gives us, treating others in holy and loving ways.

Application: Obeying the command against stealing requires more than simply not taking something that belongs to someone else. It also involves proper use and wise management of everything that we have. Wastefulness is stealing, as is misusing what God has supplied or misdirecting for foolish purposes what God intended for better uses. Pause and consider what God is saying about your own management of what He has entrusted to you.

Homework: Read **Luke 3: 3-14, 19:1-10; Acts 4:32-37 and Acts 5:1-11.**

Lesson Topics: **Jesus Changes Thieves and Becoming Givers Instead of Takers.**