

The Eighth Commandment: Stealing

You shall not steal. (Exo 20:15)

The private security industry in South Africa is the largest in the world, with around 9000 companies registered. In 2011, 16% of our GDP, R50 billion, was spent on private security. According to CNN, there are over 400 000 registered private security guards, which is more than the army and police force combined. The 9000 or more companies provide a variety of services, from manned guarding, to assets in transit security, to the physical security of barriers, fences, locks, gates, alarms, vehicle trackers, to alarm monitoring and armed response companies. Most of this activity exists because people do not obey the eighth commandment, “You shall not steal.”

We all know this. Probably all of us have had something stolen from us. I began thinking about what has been stolen from me in the last twenty years, and I counted several things. But then I began thinking if I'd be able to remember the things I have stolen from others, and I found my memory was nowhere near as sharp. We tend to be very insistent that others obey the law to not steal, but perhaps not as strict with self.

It's not hard to understand this commandment. It's etched into our earliest memories: when mother said to us, “Don't take what doesn't belong to you!” It's one of the first things that makes a human being squeal and shriek out in anger: when you take away something that he or she thinks is his or hers. Watch pre-schoolers on the playground – the fights are almost always one child taking something from another. Listen to the sound of children saying to each other “Finder's keepers, loser's weepers!” We don't need to be taught to steal, we need to be taught to not steal, to respect the property of others.

We are tempted in this area very early. I remember being in the shops with my mother where there would be these small mountains of wrapped sweets that could be weighed and bought. It seemed so easy to grab a few and pocket them. I don't remember ever doing that, but I do remember how strong the temptation seemed.

In fact, you could really say that the very first sin by Adam and Eve was the sin of stealing – taking fruit that was forbidden to them. All the other trees had been made their property. There was only one thing in the world that was not their property – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and they were tempted to steal.

They were tempted to steal by Satan, whom Jesus calls a thief and a robber. The very first sin in the universe, when Lucifer was filled with pride, was a kind of theft. He wanted and desired the worship and the glory that belonged to God alone, and sought to take some for himself. And in his act of theft, he stole the hearts of many other angels who fell with him.

Stealing is only possible if God believes in private property. If, as communism taught, there is no such thing as private property and private ownership, then it is impossible to steal. What's mine is yours and what's yours is mine. I can take what you have at the time, because you don't own it any more than I do.

When we read in the book of Acts that the early Christians had “all things common”, it does not mean the early Christians no longer had private property. It means their attitude was one of such willing, voluntary sharing, it was as if they held it in common. When Ananias lied about his property, Peter reminded him that it was his own private property until he willingly sold it for the church. Throughout the Law of Moses, God protects private property from theft, from destruction

through negligence, from being lost through extortion, from being vandalised. Penalties for all forms of stealing involved restitution, sometimes to the tune of four times the original amount stolen.

God who owns everything, grants to humans the right to own private property. He then gives this command, do not steal. He does not tell you when, or where, or how or from whom. He simply says, do not steal. This means God is saying, do not take from anyone, anywhere, for any reason what does not belong to you without their permission.

We know what stealing is, but we need to spend some time thinking about how we steal, especially in a modern world.

The most brazen and obvious form of stealing is when one man simply steals the goods or money of another. When people steal goods from shops, or steal cars, or mug others of valuables, or break into houses, or pick-pocket, this we immediately recognise as theft.

But there are plenty of other ways we can steal.

Employees can steal from their employers. They can pilfer goods, and steal stock. They can embezzle from the company, taking money secretly, or using it for personal luxuries and niceties. They can not only steal stationery and business property by taking it home or using it for personal purposes without asking, they can steal time. They can deliberately arrive late and leave early, surf the web, or spend inordinate amounts of time on personal phone calls.

Employers can steal from employees. One of the worst forms is the man who has a day labourer and does not pay the man at the end of the day. “*4 Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. (Jam 5:4)*”

Employers can steal from employees by demanding that they work far beyond any original agreement, at the same pay. And the desperate man cannot say no. His exploitation has often been the reason for the rise of unions. And now we find unions who promote theft by calling for wages and fees that their members have not earned. By boycotting industries, they are practising reverse exploitation.

People can steal from companies or businesses by stealing stock, or by simply not paying for a service rendered. I am amazed at how many people who run their own businesses tell me what percentage of people simply never pay for the work that was done for them. They receive a service and then make some excuse to not pay at all. That is theft. Or we simply have people who shoplift, and rob a company of its goods.

Companies or businesses can steal from customers by using a false balance. In biblical times, a scale was used to measure out quantities of the item being bought: food, or silver, or salt, or whatever the case. The thieving merchant, would use a weight on the one side that said, for the sake of argument “2kgs”, but actually weighed one. The merchant would then be able to give less product for more money. In our context, this would be when a business delivers less than it promises, gives faulty goods, or cheats the customer of a lawful expectation purely to save money. Businesses can steal from people by manipulating the market and fixing prices or exploiting employees.

Extortion is a form of theft. Using a person's desperate circumstance to force them to pay what they otherwise would not. When a medical professional will provide a service to a desperate person only at an exorbitant fee, this is theft.

Citizens can steal from governments. The book of Romans tells us, “ *6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing.*

7 Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. (Rom 13:6-7)

It is not wrong to avoid taxes legally. We are not more spiritual for paying maximum tax. It is wrong to not pay what is due. To lie on the income return, to refuse to pay VAT, to take your license plates off when going under the e-toll gantries, this is stealing. To get your electricity illegally, to not pay your rates, this is theft.

Governments can steal from citizens. If a government takes land from the people without compensation, it is a thieving government. If a government claims the right to confiscate what a man has rightfully bought and earned, it is stealing, regardless of what political justification it may put on it. There does come a point at which taxation becomes so burdensome, and the returns to the population so minimal, that it begins to look a lot like theft.

Certainly, if a government takes money from people who have earned it, and gives it for free to those who could earn it but don't want to, it is party to a kind of theft.

Governments can steal from other governments. Nations that claim land that is not theirs by any serious historical, political, or humanitarian right are stealing land. Nations that take another nation's raw materials, food by a kind of extortion, through political blackmail, through bullying. A lot of espionage and spying is simply stealing information from other countries.

The more societies develop, the more they trade in intangible things like information, ideas, plans, systems, technologies, algorithms. These things can be stolen with the click of a button. You can go onto the Internet and steal music that you did not pay for, steal a book you did not pay for, steal some software that was not free, steal some movies that are not free. This is the reason for copyright. Copyright is there to protect things that are easy to steal and reproduce, like books, music, software. Copyright can come in different forms – all rights reserved, some rights reserved. But before you copy it, take it, download it, check what rights the author put on it. Again – love your neighbour as yourself. If you made that book, music, software, and it is your way of making money, would you want others to pay for it or not? **When someone takes what is copyrighted, he is stealing.**

That goes into the corporate world. **It is possible to steal someone's ideas, plans, products, formulas, business model, business name, advertising ideas.** That's why we have patents, and non-disclosure agreements, because people steal ideas to make their money. If an idea has been protected by a company or person, don't steal it.

Stealing other people's writing has a name: plagiarism. When you lean over and steal the answer in an exam, when you copy your friend's homework because you didn't do yours, when you find and copy the answer sheet, or get access to the exam before the test, you are stealing. When you use someone else's exact words or his or her research in your own thesis, or book, or research paper, or sermon, and you do not give them credit, it is stealing. Charles Spurgeon had a big heart towards those who plagiarised his work. On one occasion, he was experiencing great exhaustion and melancholy, and he walked into a small chapel to worship there with the people. The preacher had one of Spurgeon's sermons, and preached word for word, as if it were his own. Spurgeon listened to the sermon, and as the topic was on assurance of salvation, it greatly gripped and blessed his own heart, until he was wiping his own eyes. When he met the pastor at the door, he expressed how grateful he was for the sermon. The pastor asked who he might be, and when Spurgeon introduced himself, he noted that the pastor turned all manner of colours. He said sheepishly, “Oh, Mr. Spurgeon, that was your sermon!” Spurgeon kindly replied, “Yes, I know, but wasn't it gracious of the Lord to feed me with food I had prepared for others?”

Gambling is perhaps the most organised and legalised form of theft in the world. Here a bunch of people take the money they have earned (in the case of those who are not part of petty or organised crime) and they throw it into big pot. Granted, they're voluntarily throwing it away, but what happens next is that most people have that money taken away from them, and one in a thousand gets a lot of other people's money that they did not earn. And of course, the casino owners get 99% of the money that fools gladly part with.

Today, the Internet has become a massive opportunity for thieves. Who hasn't received an email from someone in Nigeria claiming that they have \$2 billion waiting for us if we will just help them with the bank charges. Or we have the scam artists who try to get our bank details or credit card numbers. One of the latest is when you receive a call from people, who claim to be Microsoft engineers, saying that your computer is filled with viruses, and you need to let them take control of your computer to fix the problem.

Neighbours can steal from neighbours. When we buy stolen goods, we are part of the original theft, and are encouraging some future ones as well. When we do not pay our debts, borrowing money and imagining that time has somehow turned a loan into a gift. When we borrow the property of others, and let those things become part of our furniture.

What of leeching other people's money? We read in 2 Thessalonians that Paul considers that kind of behaviour disorderly, and encourages Christians to separate from it. People who are perpetual loafers, mooches, leeches. People who live off the backs of others. This is a kind of theft – imagining that you can eat and drink and live for free, and other people get to do all the work. You steal from your neighbour.

Vandalism is stealing from your neighbours. To maliciously damage their property, taking away from its value, requiring them to spend money fixing, cleaning or repairing it, is stealing.

Some of the worst kinds of theft have to do with stealing people. Kidnapping was punished with death in Israel, and the evil trade of kidnapping people either for ransom or to sell them into some kind of slavery continues.

Adultery is stealing someone else's wife. Doug told us the account of a man who entered a restaurant, and they mistakenly gave him the whole cash earnings for that day, wish they had placed in one of their take-away boxes. When he and his partner got to where they were going to eat, they opened the box and saw the money in there. The man returned to the restaurant, and returned the money to the manager. The manager was so grateful, he wanted to take a picture of the man and reward him. "No, please don't, said the man. See, the woman I am with right now, is not my wife." Honest with money, but stealing someone else's wife.

In 2 Samuel 15:6 we read that Absalom 'stole the hearts' of the people of Israel. It is possible to steal the loyalty of people away from one's rightful spouse, away from one's rightful boss, away from one's rightful pastor, away from one's rightful leaders. This is a theft of people, a theft of their loyalties.

Finally, there is a theft from God Himself.

8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings.

9 You are cursed with a curse, For you have robbed Me, Even this whole nation.

10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there may be food in My house, And try 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 not be room enough to receive it.
(Mal 3:8-10)*

We want to be very careful with this text because of how it has been abused. This is not saying that if you do not tithe to this church, you are a thief. But there is a principle. Some kind of giving is owed to God. God prospers us, and expects us to return a portion, a token to him. To keep back even that portion is acting as if the whole lot is yours. And that is theft. In the end, we steal from God when we use what God says is His own with no sense of consecration, no dedication to God, no sense of it being of Him and to Him and through Him.

Why do we steal? Why do employees steal from employers and employers from employees, citizens from governments and governments from citizens and other governments, people from businesses and businesses from customers, neighbours from neighbours and people from God? Why do we steal directly, indirectly, by neglect, by fraud, passively?

Let's eliminate one myth: People do not steal only because they are poor. An American profile of shoplifters revealed that most are between 25-45 years old, more women than men shoplift, according to the Illinois Retail Merchants Association, 3/4 of the shoplifters are middle to upper-middle class, and 80% of all shoplifters have money or credit cards with them to pay for the things they are stealing.

We steal because theft is in our heart, and given temptation, plus deception, you will have theft. Jesus said in Mark 7 that theft is in our hearts. *And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. 21 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, 22 "thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. 23 "All these evil things come from within and defile a man."(Mar 7:20-23)*

All the security systems we use merely say to the thief in every one of us – this will be hard to steal, and you may get caught doing it. You will never eliminate theft purely by having a prosperous society, or a place where no one is poor, or where everyone owns the same things.

Within the fallen nature of man is theft. We feel that stolen waters are sweet as Proverbs 9:17 says. We do not believe that God can furnish a table for us in the wilderness, and so in our unbelief, we act to furnish one for ourselves. And at root, we love ourselves more than our neighbours. None of us loves being robbed. We feel the injustice of it.

That's why thieves rationalise their thievery. They know they would hate being stolen from, so they have to excuse it. "I'm not stealing, I'm taking back what is rightfully mine." "They have so much, they won't even notice it is gone." "They stole from me first, so I am just taking back to even things out." "I'm not stealing it. I'll pay it back later. I'll give it back once I'm back on my feet." "It's such a small thing."

God's remedy for theft in the New Testament is more than just better security systems, as much as we will always need them.

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. (Eph 4:28)

Here you see three possibilities. You can steal what you need. You can work for what you need. You can work to meet your needs and that of others. The third one is what God would have us do.

First, believers who have embraced Christ as Lord and Saviour and Provider, are to steal no more. We need to put this off entirely. Stealing online, stealing time, stealing goods and services, stealing spouses, stealing from God. We can do this because we have come to know God through His Son. And since we know Him, we know He is the provider. He “*gives us richly all things to enjoy.*” (1Ti 6:17) We know that if we seek first the kingdom of God, all these things – food and clothing – will be added unto us. No one eats except by God opening His hand.

Second, with that knowledge we do the thing God has ordained to make eating possible – we work. We need to put on labour. God ordains good, hard work. We don't need to over-literalise 'working with his hands'. Your work might be with your voice, or with your mind, or with your keyboard. The point is that you yourself do decent, honest, hard work.

The third thing to do takes this further. It's possible though to work for no one except yourself. This is certainly better than stealing, but it is not the ideal. God's ideal is to work to meet needs beyond yourself. You work so as to support children, and the elderly, and to create jobs for others, and to alleviate financial pressure on others.

The man who is working so as to meet the needs of others is two steps away from being a thief.

Is there mercy for thieves? One Friday afternoon two thieves were facing the death penalty, more than likely because their thievery was aggravated by murder or by treason. And they were being executed in the harshest way – with a Persian method of torture perfected by the Romans: crucifixion. But crucified in the middle of them was Jesus of Nazareth. Both of them began by mocking Jesus with the others, perhaps hoping someone might show them mercy.

But then one of them had a change of heart. Maybe when he saw Jesus forgiving His enemies. Whenever it happened, he ended up rebuking the other thief for accusing Jesus, and asked Jesus to remember him. What did he hear in reply from Jesus? “Truly, today you will be with Me in paradise.” And there is a picture of the whole human race. We are all thieves, but we can land up on either side of Jesus Christ. We can keep denying our sin, keep accusing Him and others and face eternal punishment. Or we can go to the other side, repenting of our thievery and sin, and looking to Him for mercy. Yes, there is mercy for thieves. There is grace.

Christ will take you as you are. He will not leave you as you are, but He will take you as you are.