



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Robbing God and Man

Reverend Scott Johnson | January 4, 2026 | Exodus 20:15

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading is Exodus chapter 20 verse 15. You shall not steal. That's the eighth commandment.

New Testament Reading

And now you can, we'll turn back to that in a minute, but now let's go to the New Testament for our New Testament reading, which is Ephesians chapter four, Ephesians four, verses 25 through 32.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor doing honest work with his own hands so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God and Christ forgave you. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. And this is the infallible and inerrant word of God.

The Eighth Commandment

So this morning we are looking at Exodus chapter 20, verse 15, the eighth commandment. And as we have been taking a closer look these past several weeks at the Ten Commandments and taking a close look at each one of these commandments, one thing that we have seen is that with these commandments, there is always more than meets the eye. Most of the commandments are very short. In fact, some of them, like the commandment we are considering this morning, the Eighth Commandment, in Hebrew, it's only two words long. So they are very brief, very short.

Despite that, though, the way in which each of these commandments applies to our lives is very comprehensive, very thorough. In fact, if we take the Ten Commandments as a whole, there is no sin that is not forbidden here, and there is no obedience that is not commanded here. And so God's law comes to us in this very concise, succinct list of 10 commandments, and yet this law applies to the entirety of our lives, to everything that we do or say or think.

The brevity of the 10 commandments also tells us something about God's view of sin and how different that is from our own way of dealing with sin. We tend to rationalize our sin, to explain it away. We use euphemisms to speak about our sin. But when we read these 10 commandments, we're reminded that sin is sin. Particularly when we consider the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ about these commandments, we know that God calls a spade a spade. Jesus said that to lust after a woman in your heart, that is nothing less than to commit adultery with her. To be angry at someone is nothing less than to commit murder.

In this truthful, this straightforward way of identifying a sin for what it is, this is especially applicable when we come to consider the eighth commandment. You shall not steal. Very few people consider themselves to be thieves. Very few people will confess to the sin of stealing. But stealing and thievery are exactly the right words to describe so many practices that are so universal, so accepted, that they are essentially regarded as normal human behavior.

For example, what is more normal than for an employee to take it easy at the office when the boss is away that day? And yet, despite the fact that that's normal and accepted, that's really a form of stealing. A person is stealing from his company the work and productivity he is supposed to give to it. But who considers that thievery or stealing? Well, God does. And he considers many other things to be stealing that we may consider to be accepted or just part of

the world. And so we may not consider ourselves thieves, but we have all been guilty in one way or the other of stealing. We have both stolen from God and we have stolen from man.

And as we take a look at this eighth commandment this morning, that is the basic outline that we will use to unpack this commandment. When we are honest with ourselves, we'll see that we have been guilty of robbing God and of robbing our neighbor.

Robbing Our Neighbor

And so first we'll consider how the eighth commandment forbids robbing our neighbor. It's hardly necessary to give a definition of what stealing is. We all know it. We've all have experienced it, either the victim of stealing, or we have one way or the other taken something that doesn't belong to us. But it simply means to unlawfully take away something that belongs to another person.

And before we explore the various ways in which stealing takes place, it's important to see that one thing that this commandment assumes, presupposes, is that there is such a thing as a right to property. There is such a thing as individual ownership over things. And so biblically, we can say that as far as our relations to one another are concerned, God has given you the right of ownership over certain things. If everybody owned everything in common, it would be impossible to steal anything because everything would already belong to you. But God has given us an inherent right to have ownership and possession over certain things that other people do not have any claim to own.

And we all do possess all kinds of things. Things that are both tangible and things that are intangible. But the most obvious things that we own are the material things that we possess: our property, our money, our stuff. And when you hear the eighth commandment, you shall not steal, that is naturally the first thing that comes to mind. That has to do with stealing someone's property, someone's stuff, their money.

Robbery

This can take place in many, many ways. It can take place by robbery. Robbery is when someone takes something from you in person with the force of violence or the threat of violence or using violence. But far more common than robbery is secret theft. As we know, most thieves

will steal from us when we're not around. For example, you go away for the day, a thief breaks into your house, or you leave your car in the parking lot, someone breaks into your car. In fact, the Hebrew word that is used here in the Eighth Commandment has reference primarily to that kind of secret theft of taking something away when that person doesn't know it.

And the number of ways that this kind of secret theft takes place is only limited by the depraved imagination and ingenuity of man. Just to name a few ways this kind of secret theft takes place: there is burglary, fraud, identity theft, stealing credit card numbers, and on and on and on.

Dishonesty

Another common form of theft that the Eighth Commandment forbids is dishonesty in business transactions or dishonesty in any kind of transaction involving money or property in which one person takes more than they are entitled to through shady dealings or deception or lying. When I was in high school, my best friend and I, for money, we mowed yards in the neighborhood, and one day, when we finished mowing the lawn of a lady in the neighborhood, she paid us with what she thought was a bunch of quarters. We didn't get a lot of money for each yard, so we could actually be paid in quarters sometimes.

When we looked at the quarters later, we realized that what she had actually given us was a bunch of Susan B. Anthony dollars. And if you're old enough, you'll remember the Susan B. Anthony dollar was about the same size as a quarter and they were very easy to confuse or to be to confuse. And so she paid us four times the amount that we had agreed upon for us mowing her yard. And obviously, the honest, the right thing for us to do would have been to return that excess money back to the woman who gave it to us. But I'm ashamed to say we kept it for ourselves.

And the thing is, neither my friend or I would have considered ourselves to be thieves or burglars or robbers. We would not have dreamed of breaking into the lady's house and stealing her purse. And yet what we did amounted to the very same thing. And so we were thieves. We stole her money. We'd broken the eighth commandment.

Borrowing and Not Returning

Yet another way to steal someone's property is to borrow something and never give it back. Psalm 37, 21 says, the wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous

and gives. Loaned books have a way of never finding their way back home. I once heard of a pastor who put a stamp in each one of his books in the library that quoted Psalm 37, the wicked borroweth and returneth not. So when the person saw that stamp, they were reminded that they needed to return that book.

Plagiarism

But people steal much more than just tangible things, such as your wallet or your jewelry. Virtually anything that can be owned can be stolen. You can steal someone's intellectual work or intellectual property. That's called plagiarism. A classmate in seminary told me one time how he had visited a church on a Sunday morning and the pastor of that church preached an excellent sermon. And this student on his way back home from church, he happened to have some tapes of recorded sermons by Dr. James Boyce. Some of you will remember him. He was the pastor of 10th Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia.

And as he started to listen to one of Dr. Boyce's sermons, he realized he was hearing the exact same sermon word for word that he had heard preached in the church that morning. And so the pastor was guilty of theft. He had stolen a sermon written by another person and claimed it as his own. And you'd be surprised how often that happens. You would think that that would be unheard of, but it's not.

Violating Copyright Laws

Another form of stealing intangible property is violating copyright laws. The very same people who would vehemently deny that they are thieves or robbers or guilty of stealing, they will have no problem downloading copyrighted music or movies from the internet. Again, that's another practice that so many people consider just to be normal, and yet it is a form of theft.

Not Doing an Honest Day's Work

Another common form of theft is employees stealing from their companies, and that's just not taking home office supplies, but anytime an employee fails to put in a full day's work, an honest day's work, anytime he fails to give himself wholly to the job that he is paid to do, anytime he calls in sick when he's not sick, he is stealing from his employer. That, too, is a kind of theft.

Stealing from Big Companies

The general rule is that the more impersonal the victim, the less hesitant people will be to steal. I had a friend in college who every time we went to the store for fun, he would put a candy bar in his pocket and walk out with it. And I remember him telling me, explaining to me why this was okay. And it was because he was stealing from a big company and he would never steal something from an individual. And yet he was stealing from individuals because guess who pays the cost of the goods that we purchase that are much higher because of theft? It's you and me, it's individuals. I read somewhere that up to one third of the price of any product can be attributed to the cost of theft that happens along the way as that product goes to market.

But people don't see it that way. They see a big and personal company, it's okay to steal from them, they have loads of money, and that's especially true when it comes to the government. The government is such a huge and personal entity that even otherwise, usually honest people will be tempted to steal from it. And so people will fudge their numbers on their tax returns, or they may apply for government assistance or disability payments that they don't really need. Contractors will pay or they will charge the government inflated prices for their goods and services.

And all of them believe that their little indiscretions don't amount to much. They don't really hurt anyone. After all, it's the government. I mean, the government has all kinds of money, right? The government literally makes money. Well, no. Government money is taxpayer money. Government money is people's money. And so stealing from the government is just another way of stealing from your neighbor.

Waste, Fraud, Corruption and Mismanagement

And of course, the government itself is far from innocent in regards to the Eighth Commandment. Government waste, fraud, corruption, mismanagement: these are all ways in which the government steals from the taxpayers who support it. And not only that, but out-of-control deficit spending, like we're seeing today, that too is tantamount. It's essentially stealing from future generations. Future generations will have to foot the bill for the profligate spending of the government that their parents and grandparents.

Deceptive Practices

Private companies can engage in all kinds of larceny, price gouging, false advertising, deceptive packaging, falsified financial reports and performance records to keep stock prices artificially high to give the board or the officers of the company a big bonus or a big income. These are all ways that companies will break the Eighth Commandment.

Stealing Your Neighbor's Person

And finally, the Eighth Commandment forbids not only stealing your neighbor's property, but also stealing your neighbor's person. The Eighth Commandment forbids kidnapping. In 1 Timothy 1, Paul writes about the law of God, and he lists various sins, and those sins follow the structure or the order of the Ten Commandments. Let me read this passage to you. It's 1 Timothy 1, verses 9 and 10.

It says, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers. That's the 5th commandment. For murderers, that's the 6th commandment. The sexually immoral, 7th commandment. Men who practice homosexuality, 7th commandment. Enslavers, 8th commandment. Liars, 9th commandment. Perjurers, 9th commandment. And whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.

Kidnapping & Slavery

The sin that the Apostle identifies, that he corresponds with the Eighth Commandment in the ESV is called enslavers. The Greek word literally means kidnappers. I think the King James Version has it as man-stealers or men-stealing, something like that. That is, taking a human being to be used or sold for slavery. And so the Bible very clearly condemns stealing human beings in order to enslave them.

Now, it is true that there were specific forms of slavery that were condoned or at least permitted in the Old Testament. And it's also true that the New Testament nowhere explicitly condemns the practice of slavery as it existed in Greco-Roman society in that day. However, we can say without doubt, we can say without qualification, that the Bible condemns the institution of slavery as it existed in our country up to the Civil War. Because American slavery was based upon the

stealing of human beings in Africa to make them and their children and their grandchildren and so on slaves. Therefore, it was an evil institution.

And there are so many other biblical considerations we can bring into view here. But even leaving those aside, just the very nature of the chattel slavery that existed in the South in our country, because it was founded on the stealing of people in Africa, whether they were stolen by the slave traders themselves or whether they were purchased from other tribes who had stolen them from other tribes. Nevertheless, those people were stolen. And what that means is that that institution of slavery, the institution of slavery that existed in our nation, was intrinsically, inherently wicked in God's sight.

And so no matter how some people may want to defend it, rationalize it, romanticize it even, the institution of slavery in the South was evil. It was irredeemably evil because it was based on breaking the Eighth Commandment. And if we broaden our view from the institution of slavery to more general forms of injustice in society, we can say that any laws, any customs that are based on racial prejudice or sinful discrimination, laws or customs by which people's freedom or their opportunities for advancement are unjustly taken from them, that too is a form of theft.

Disrespect

And we can bring this down to an even more personal level. Anytime I fail to give my neighbor, for whatever reason, the respect, the honor, the consideration that is his due as a fellow image bearer of God, essentially I am stealing from him what I owe him. I owe him respect, I owe him consideration, honor, because he bears the image of God, even if he looks very different from me.

And so when we consider the comprehensive scope of the Eighth Commandment, when we consider all of the ways in which we have stolen from others, we can understand why Martin Luther said what he did. Martin Luther said this at one point, he said, if we look at mankind in all its conditions, it is nothing but a vast, wide stable full of great thieves. That's not a real rosy, outlook on the state of humanity. It's not the kind of inspirational quote you'll find in your daily devotional calendar. And yet it is true. Stealing is endemic. It is widespread. In one way or another, we have all robbed our neighbor.

And because stealing is robbing your neighbor, it's very personal. You know that feeling. You have had things stolen from you. You have had things taken from you and it feels like you have

been personally violated. It feels like someone has walked up to you and slapped you in the face. And we feel this way because our possessions are really a kind of extension of ourselves. It is a very personal violation when somebody steals from us.

Robbing God

But we need to go beyond that because the fact that stealing is robbing our neighbor doesn't give us the whole truth about theft and stealing. Because ultimately, stealing is stealing from God. It is robbing God. And that's our second point: the eighth commandment forbids robbing God. And that's because the true owner, the one who has possession of all things, the one who has the title, the right to say, this is mine, of all things, of course, that is God.

Psalm 24, one and two: the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers. Because God alone is the creator of heaven and earth and all things in it, God alone has the right to say of all things, this is mine, this belongs to me. And this is so crucial for us to understand because how we define stealing depends so much on how we understand who owns what, what belongs to whom.

We have missionaries and we've had missionaries in the country of Uganda for many, many years now. And one of the places where they minister is an area called Karimoja and the Karimojang people who live there. Traditionally, they have been cattle raiders. However, they have a very interesting way to justify that way of life. They believe that God has given the Karamojang people all the cattle in the world. And so for that reason, in their eyes, it becomes necessary from time to time to visit a neighboring tribe and reclaim some of their cattle that belongs to them. And the reasoning is certainly sound, the logic is there, but of course the premise is faulty, the premise is bad. They are not the rightful owners of all the livestock in the world.

And as Christians, our understanding of who owns what must be based on the word of God. And the word of God tells us clearly that it is God who owns all things. Romans 11, 36: for of him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever and ever, amen.

My grandfather was a cowboy from Western Montana, and he had his own brand, RJ Bar, capital R, capital J with an underline underneath it. And he loved to put his brand on everything

he owned, on his shoes, his boots, his hats, his t-shirts. He wrote RJ Bar. And so there was no question what belonged to Grandpa Romaine. He had his brand on everything. And in the same way, because God is the creator of all things, he has stamped his brand on everything. Everything that exists is stamped with the seal of God's ownership. This is mine, I created it, it belongs to me.

And what that means is that for us, we don't own anything in that ultimate sense. We are only stewards of what God has entrusted to our care. We are only caretakers of what God has given to us, we might say loaned to us to be used for his glory. And when we fail to use or we misuse or we abuse what God has entrusted to our care, we are really then stealing from God. We steal from God when we do not use all the resources, all the abilities, all the gifts, talents that he has given us in order to serve him. When we hold back anything from God for ourselves, we are robbing God.

In the parable of the talents, the wicked servant who did not invest his talent in the bank, but he hid it in the ground, he had to answer to his master for that sin. And we too will all have to answer to God for the way that we have used or have failed to use the gifts, the resources, the talents that God has given to us.

Faithful Stewardship

And so the negative side of the Eighth Commandment is just what it says, you shall not steal. The positive side of that is that we are to be faithful as stewards. We're to be faithful stewards to use for God's glory everything that he's given to us. And part of that means sharing, sharing with others what God has given to us.

Sharing with Others

The late author Jerry Bridges said that there are three basic attitudes that we might have concerning our possessions or money. The first one is, what's yours is mine, I'll take it. And that of course is the mindset of a thief. The second attitude that we may have is, what's mine is mine, I'll keep it. And this is a self-centered attitude towards what we own. It's seeking to use and to accrue, to gain what we have, only in order to please ourselves. And this is probably the area where most of us struggle.

But the third attitude, the one that is right, is to say, what's mine is God's, I'll share it. This is godly stewardship. And you see this contrast between self-centered or really the contrast between what the 8th commandment forbids and what it commands and what Paul says in that passage from Ephesians 4 that we heard earlier. Ephesians 4 28: let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor doing honest work with his own hands so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. And so Paul is saying the thief, who was once a thief, but by the grace of God, he's no longer a thief, he must do the opposite of stealing, and that is sharing, working with his hands, and then giving to others what he has gained by his honest labor.

Tithes and Offerings

And that is what we are commanded in the Eighth Commandment, to share. Share what you have gained rightfully, or what is already rightfully yours, in order to share it with others. And of course, this stewardship applies to our giving financially, our giving financially to the church, our giving financially to support ministries of the gospel. This is a part of what God requires of us.

This raises the question, well, how much do I give? The Old Testament had a very definite numerical standard, 10%, 10% of what you receive is what you are to give back to the Lord. I don't believe that in the new covenant that the church today, that God requires a numerical amount of 10%. However, God does command us to give to the work of the kingdom. As we are able to give, we are commanded to give faithfully, sacrificially, cheerfully. For some, that may be less than 10%. For others, it may be way more than 10%. But either way, to give nothing to the kingdom of God is the equivalent of robbing God.

Malachi 3, 8 and 9: Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, how have we robbed you? In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with the curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. And that's what God had said to the people of Israel. And that applies today as well. If we fail to give what we can to God's work through the church and the kingdom of God, then we are robbing God.

The Ultimate Theft and the Gift of Christ

But as sinners, we rob God in much more profound ways than withholding our finances from him. Our entire being, all that we have, all that we are, belongs to God. He is your creator, he is your redeemer, and therefore you owe him obedience. You owe him the obedience that is his

due as the one who made you and the one who saved you. You owe him your love, your worship, your praise, your devotion, your service. You owe all that to God.

And God in Christ claimed absolute sovereignty over you. There is no part of you, there is nothing that you own that you can call your very own. And therefore, anytime that you fail to honor Jesus Christ, anytime that you fail to give glory to God, you are robbing God. You are keeping from him what is rightfully his. And so every self-centered act, every selfish desire, every selfish thought is really an act of larceny against Christ. And so in the deepest and most profound way, as sinners, we are thieves because we have robbed God of the glory that we are bound to give him with our lives.

Now, when someone steals from you, you know how you respond to that, unless you are a much better person than me. Your first response is revenge, justice. I want that person to pay. He has wronged me. But thankfully, the Lord Jesus Christ is not like that. He is merciful. He is gracious to sinners such as us who have robbed him of his glory.

The scriptures give us a very powerful picture of the mercy of God towards those who are guilty of breaking the eighth commandment. When Jesus was crucified, there was one man on his right and one man on his left who were being crucified with him. Mark 15, 27 says, and with him, they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. We don't know a lot about these men. We don't know what they stole, but they were thieves. They were robbers. And according to the Roman system of justice, they were getting exactly what they deserved.

And in Luke's gospel, we read that one of the robbers says to Jesus, as both were hanging on their crosses, dying that slow, agonizing death, the robber said to Jesus, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus said to him, truly, I say to you, today, you will be with me in paradise. Again, there is not one of us here who could not take the place of that thief on the cross. There's not one of us here who has not broken the eighth commandment in some way or some form of taking what was not lawfully ours. We are guilty of robbing our neighbor and of robbing God.

But just as Jesus spoke a word of mercy, forgiveness, promise, and hope to that thief on the cross, so he speaks that same word of forgiveness and mercy to you and me: today you will be with me in paradise. Isn't it amazing what Jesus did for us in his life and in his crucifixion and death? We are guilty of stealing. We have taken what does not rightfully belong to us and taken it for ourself. But at the cross, Jesus took what was rightfully his already: His righteousness, His

purity, His obedience, His status as the Son, the eternally beloved Son of God, and He has given it to you and to me.

And that gift that Christ gives to sinners such as us, that is yours if He is your Savior by faith, if you have come to Him by faith, if you have entrusted yourself to Him as your Savior from sin and death. That gift of his life, his righteousness, his sonship, he gives to you. He does not take from you. Well, he takes your sin and guilt, but he gives you his righteousness.

And as a believer in Jesus Christ as one who has received that gift of eternal life with the forgiveness of sins, what is your response? How do you respond to that? Well, you give yourself to Christ. You give all that you have to Christ: your possessions, your wealth, your time, your talents, your heart, your life. All of this, all of you belong to Christ.

The first answer in the Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way: I am not my own, but belong body and soul and life and death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. It is only by the grace of God that you and I can say, I am not my own, but I belong to Christ, body and soul, in life and in death. I belong to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. And the eighth commandment then is a call for you and me as those who belong to Jesus Christ to live according to that grace, to live according to that truth, to give ourselves to our faithful Savior who gave himself to us. Let's pray.