

## ***Steal No More***

*Basic Scripture resources: Exodus 20.15;  
I Kings 21:1-19; Amos 8:4-7; Mark 12.41-44;  
Luke 19:1-10, Ephesians 4:28; James 2:14-17.*

The concept of private property is ancient and universal. Even a small child understands the meaning of "my toy" or "my doll." Most of us simply presuppose this right and have developed general patterns of living in accord with it.

The right to own private property should not be taken for granted, however. The Christian should realize that it is a privilege granted by God and guarded by His Word. The eighth Commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," specifically establishes the principle of the *sanctity of private ownership*.

The private ownership of property and goods is a right that must be recognized and respected by all. It involves more than rights, however. It also involves responsibilities that an owner must be willing to bear. This chapter will attempt to set forth both rights and responsibilities.

### ***I. Private Property***

The ultimate and primary owner of all things is God. He owns everything because He created it all. Psalm 24:1,2 says, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods." (See Psalm 50:7-12; Haggai 2:8.)

Although God is the primary owner of all things by right of creation, He has granted to us the rights and responsibilities of secondary ownership. He did this in the very beginning when He created man and woman and directed them to subdue the earth and have dominion over everything in it (Genesis 1:26-28).

This mandate to subdue the earth shows that private ownership is not achieved apart from work. It shows that God expected man to acquire private property by means of personal labor. This same point is seen in Ephesians 4:28, which says, "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing which is good." Theft is the unlawful acquiring of property, but labor is the God-intended means for earning it.

Marxist communism as an economic system denies this Biblical teaching. A basic communistic doctrine is that all the means of producing goods, including raw materials and machinery and factories, belong to the state. Private enterprise is thus totally abolished. The only private property allowed under communism consists of goods for personal consumption.

Apart from the full reality of private ownership, however, the eighth Commandment is meaningless. The very fact that God has prohibited stealing means that He has placed His stamp of approval on the individual's right to own property. This command both presupposes and protects this right, and it forbids any encroachment upon it.

### ***II. Stealing***

The sanctity of private ownership demands that each person respect the right of others to own property. Thus the law of God (not just of the state) prohibits stealing, which is anything that violates this right of private ownership, or anything that deprives another of his own property.

### ***Secret Theft***

There are many ways to steal. One of the most common is ordinary theft. This involves taking someone else's property in a secret, stealthy manner, by which one hopes to avoid notice. The scene that most of us call to mind when such theft is mentioned is that of a burglar as he pries open a window in the rear of a house or store and then proceeds to cart away the silverware or loot the cash register. Few people steal in this manner, however. The most common forms of theft are much less open and spectacular, yet they are theft just the same.

One such way of stealing is shoplifting, which is becoming more and more common. Many try to justify it by stealing from large stores and saying, "They are so big they will never miss it." They do miss it, of course; and in the end the ones who suffer are the store's customers, who are charged higher prices in order to make up for the loss. What we must realize is that stealing is stealing, whether it be from a pauper or from a millionaire. The greatest harm is not to the victim's purse but to the thief's heart.

"Employee theft" or "white collar theft" is another very widespread practice. Many millions of dollars worth of goods and equipment disappear from offices, stores, and factories each year. They are pilfered by trusted employees, many of whom feel they are doing nothing wrong. But again, such actions are theft. A Christian will respect his employer's property, whether it be a power saw or a paper clip.

A slightly different kind of theft is plagiarism. This occurs when one writer deliberately quotes from another without giving credit, pretending that the stolen ideas are his own. Thefts of this kind occur on all levels, from students preparing term papers, to executives writing reports, to writers submitting manuscripts to publishers.

### ***Robbery by Force***

Another form of stealing is robbery by force, a situation in which the robber forces a person to turn over his money or possessions simply by overpowering him or by threatening him with harm.

This includes anything from ordinary robbery of the "stick-em-up" type to the illegitimate confiscation or nationalization of private property by a strong-armed government. It also includes kidnaping and looting, as well as the more "genteel" crimes of bribery and extortion.

An even more subtle form of robbery by force is the unjust labor strike, in which a single-minded group of people openly extorts money and other concessions from an employer under threat of harm. The employer himself is threatened with economic harm as a result of the shut-down of his business. Fellow-workers are threatened with physical harm if they attempt to continue working. The public is harmed by being deprived of necessary goods and services, and by being forced to bear the burden of higher labor costs.

Such robbery by force, in any of its forms, arises from a basic contempt for the property rights of others. It stands condemned by the eighth Commandment.

### ***Robbery by Deceit***

Another form of theft that is very widespread is robbery by deceit. The technical name

for this is fraud. It occurs frequently in the area of business and trade. A merchant can rob a customer by falsely labeling his goods with regard to weight, count, and quality. A customer can rob a merchant by deliberately incurring an unpayable debt and declaring bankruptcy. The Bible condemns such fraudulent practices in Amos 8:4-7.

Other common forms of fraud include entering false information on one's tax form or falsifying an insurance claim. Housewives and merchants often conspire to defraud manufacturers by cashing "cents-off" promotional coupons when the specified products have not been bought. Most coupons clearly state that such a practice is fraud.

In the eyes of many people this kind of robbery is a very mild sin, if indeed it is considered sin at all. Thus even Christians are often guilty of it without fully realizing the seriousness of their deeds. In principle, however, it is no different from any other theft. Even though many people are doing it, and seem to be getting away with it, it is still wrong. The eighth Commandment forbids it.

### ***Steal No More!***

All forms of stealing are rooted in a kind of covetousness, namely, an unlawful desire to possess that which belongs to someone else. The evil consequences of such desire are clearly seen in the account of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-19).

To avoid the temptation to steal, we must learn to conquer covetousness. We must learn to respect the sanctity of private ownership. We must also learn that life does not consist in the abundance of the things we possess (Luke 12:15).

Like any sin, stealing can be forgiven if one truly repents and turns to God. True repentance demands that restitution be made wherever possible, though.

### ***III. Stewardship***

The concept of private property requires us not only to respect the property rights of others, but also to be conscientious stewards of our own possessions. We must remember that what we call "our own personal property" ultimately belongs to God; we are only stewards of it. We are required to use it for God's glory, and we must give account of it to Him.

Good stewardship requires us to be frugal and thrifty in our use of natural resources and products derived therefrom. Affluence is no excuse for wastefulness. No matter how much money a person has, he has no right to discard anything before its usefulness has been exhausted. Along this same line, public officials are obligated to be thrifty with regard to public funds and public natural resources.

Good stewardship also requires us to give a proportionate amount of our income to the work of God's church. Failure to do so is specifically called robbery by God's prophet (Malachi 3:8-10). In God's sight the *amount* one gives has never been as important as the proportion or *percentage* of one's income that one gives. Proportionate giving is the only system that God has ever authorized, even in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 16:2). Jesus praised the poor woman who gave a large percentage of her possessions (Mark 12:41-44).

Good stewardship finally requires sharing with those who are in need. See Ephesians 4:28; James 2:14-17; Acts 2:44, 45; 4:34-37.

Private property is a means of power, either for good or for evil, depending on one's attitude toward it and the use of it. One can use it to enrich himself at the expense of others, or one can use it to help others to the glory of God. The latter is good stewardship.