

CHAPTER 11
You Shall Not Steal
protecting dominion in your family

Introduction

Man's urge to want what does not belong to him is concealed with a very thin disguise in human nature. Even the very youngest show their colors in this area. When two very little children are sitting near each other, it does not take long before one steals the toy of his neighbor. As soon as children achieve mobility they snatch toys from others and make for the hills. The amazing thing in children is that typically they take from others for the simple reason that they can. The thief usually has no real interest in the object with which their victim was playing until he sees that his neighbor has it. The point of interest stems more from not having it than from the desirability of the object. Once the child is able to take it, they do. As children grow, parents correct, rebuke, warn and discipline them so they learn stealing is a sin in God's sight. This chapter looks at a broader application of the concept of stealing to see how parents can do more than just restrict physical theft. With God's Holy Spirit working through the parents, by applying proper instruction an attitude can be fostered

that will help children gain a proper, biblical understanding of how they are to interact with the private property belonging to others.

Stealing in the Bible

Consideration of the idea of stealing must begin with the knowledge that all things belong to God. Ultimately, when a person takes what is not given to him, he steals that which God gave to another and makes it his own. It is a man-centered rebellion against God's distribution of His possessions. He is not stealing from man so much as from God. Therefore, when the Bible gives its laws of concerning theft and restitution, it is assigning a value to sins committed against God Almighty himself. In some cases the connection will be somewhat harder to distinguish than in others. This chapter will begin by looking at the most obvious example of stealing from God.

There is one behavior, or lack thereof, that easily connects with theft from God: the neglect of the tithe. Some argue the tithe is no longer applicable for the New Testament Christian. In some places the Bible does seem to convey that very sentiment. For example 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." However, as always Scripture must interpret Scripture to give a full understanding. To help understand the abiding obligation of giving a tithe to the Lord, there are other passages that also shed light on this topic.

In Luke 11:42 Jesus reprimands the Pharisees for their external action void of love for God. The Pharisees were scrupulous in their tithe, to the point that they even tithed on their spices. However, while being diligent in their tithe, they neglected justice and love for God. At the end of the reproof, Jesus says to them, "These [that is the tithes] you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." Jesus does not negate the responsibility to tithe, but instead says that void of justice and love for God, the point of the exercise has been missed. In Christian homes, parents ought to establish a foundation for understanding theft. When children steal, they steal from God. That is because all things already belong to him. The best way for parents to set a positive example for their children is by tithing on their income. It allows the parent to show in action, and to teach by explanation, how gratitude for God's generosity so the family motivates the Christian to bring God his tithe. God's ownership of all things sits at the foundation of the sin of stealing.

The proper understanding that all decisions in life reflect man's opinion of God that the gravity of stealing will be understood. It is easy to forget this aspect of the eighth commandment because it appears that this transgression is against man only. God does not seem to be in the picture. However, he is and he clearly defines what is involved in stealing.

Good and Necessary Consequence

The dictionary definition of “stealing” usually has something to do with taking a physical object that belongs to another without their permission. However, when examining what the writers of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* and *Shorter Catechisms* and the *Heidelberg Catechism* include, there clearly is a broader principle. Their work in explaining and summarizing what the Bible teaches casts the definition of stealing in a broader biblical light. In doing so they help make appropriate application of this commandment. In the minds of the pastors who wrote these aids, stealing reaches into the inner core of man and so they deal even with the heart motives and reasons behind why people do what they do. In a sense, sin against the eighth commandment is the practical outworking of the yet-to-be-discussed tenth commandment, which forbids coveting. Covetousness is the seed form of which the act of stealing is the full fruit. In *Westminster Larger Catechism* #142 the writers list twenty-nine different applications of the eighth commandment.

The sins forbidden in the eighth commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are, theft, robbery, manstealing, and receiving anything that is stolen; fraudulent dealing, false weights and measures, removing landmarks, injustice and unfaithfulness in contracts between man and man, or in matters of trust; oppression, extortion, usury, bribery, vexatious lawsuits, unjust enclosures and depredation; engrossing commodities to enhance the price; unlawful callings, and all other unjust or sinful ways of taking or withholding from our neighbor what belongs to him, or of enriching ourselves; covetousness; inordinate prizing and affecting worldly goods; distrustful and distracting cares and studies in getting, keeping, and using them; envying at the prosperity of others; as likewise idleness, prodigality, wasteful gaming; and all other ways whereby we do unduly prejudice our own outward estate, and defrauding ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God hath given us.

Such a wide range of transgressions associated with this law can make for a surprising list! The reason the 17th century pastors made this broad application is that they had a clear picture of the root cause behind the sin of stealing. This transgression deals with man’s uncontrolled desire to take unlawfully what he, in God’s good providence, has not been given. That fundamental principle can be violated in so many different ways, which is reflected in the text of the catechisms. The *Larger Catechism* deals with the obvious applications such as theft and robbery, but there are many more which we will examine below.

If man is not to deprive his neighbor by his actions, the opposite virtue would be to seek his neighbor’s good. The *Heidelberg Catechism* addresses this issue clearly in #111 when it says this commandment requires: “That I promote the advantage of my neighbor in every instance I can or may, and deal with him as I desire to be dealt with by others; further also that I faithfully labor, so that I may be able to relieve the needy.” Not only should people treat their neighbor as they would like to

be treated, but they are also to work hard so they can help those who have material needs. The *Heidelberg* really restates the golden rule, or the royal law, as James calls it. “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well.”¹ Christians should be seeking to honor God in their relationships with the people who live around them. That is reason Christians should return the extra money the cashier accidentally gave them. That is why they run to catch someone who has dropped their wallet without realizing it. By doing so, they protect and promote the property of their neighbors and are treating them the way God would have them do. The biblical “test” to apply to determine right motive is for a person to ask themselves if they would like to be treated in the same way in a similar situation and then to answer honestly. The essential principle behind this commandment is for man not to deprive his neighbor. Instead he is to promote his neighbor’s good. Therefore, when it comes to teaching in the home, parents would do well to pay attention to both the positive and negative lessons from this commandment.

What Will This Look Like in My Family?

At some point in the practice of family’s worship, or family devotions parents will undoubtedly have the opportunity to teach the concepts of this commandment to their children. Sometimes they may not have the luxury to wait until family worship if one of their little cherubs decides to engage in these behaviors prior to family worship. Sometimes a child’s decision forces parents to deal with an issue they were hoping to put off for some other time. In fact, the many ways in which children’s decisions will violate the eighth commandment, makes the likelihood of dealing with it outside of some natural order almost inevitable. The parents’ task is to recognize the manifestations of this sin so that they will be able to properly direct them to walk according to the laws of the Lord.

Many probably have thought of what theft in the home may look like. Some instances of breaking this commandment have become so common that they are clichés in the English language. For example, the saying, “You got caught with your hand in the cookie jar,” has become synonymous with being caught in the act, and not just stealing. The reason everyone understands the meaning behind the saying is because this behavior is so common, also in families. However, just because a sin is rampant does not mean it should be accepted. Parents have to help their children realize their sinful behavior. Below are some of the more common ways children steal from parents and each other in the home. When recognizing these transgressions they have an opportunity to correct, rebuke and pro-actively teach their children. Parents must be sure to take the opportunities those moments provide. Later in the chapter I will deal with specific methods of teaching that could be used. For the moment, there are different forms of theft that can be considered.

1 James 2:8 (ESV).

Taking Without Asking

There are the obvious instances. For example, when children will take something from his brother or sister, or even parents, without asking. This chapter has already given the example of the cookie jar, but there is no need to restrict it to food items only. Clothing, special toys, and even favorite cups can be the objects that tempt a child to steal. As a result, children, mirroring the sin nature of his parents, will steal these and many other things as they live in at home. These thefts will mostly be obvious and thankfully so. However, when it comes to children in the teen years, the issue may crop up in unexpected places. It is possible that one day, while eating breakfast, a teen-aged son who has recently caught up to dad in shoe size comes down wearing his new pair of running shoes. He did not ask if he could wear them, he simply put them on. That young man has just taken ownership of something that is not his. He has stolen. I doubt anyone will have trouble recognizing the behaviors in this section of the chapter. When encountered parents must respond appropriately with patient teaching and appropriate correction. However, there are other common behaviors that are less easily recognized.

Cheating

The violation of this commandment may take the form of cheating. Cheating happens in a variety of situations, but the more common ones in parenting will deal with school-work and games. These times can be very discouraging because they reflect the value that the child places on their integrity in their work. In academic cheating the child steals the hard work of his fellows students, or from the answer guide to secure a good mark. The child intends to avoid the necessary effort required to acquire the knowledge to pass the test. In stealing physical objects, the transgressor tries to get the object without the necessary labor required to purchase it. The same process and motivation is in place when someone tries to steal answers on a test, assignment or other form of work. In fact, that same inner motivation is at work in a person when they cheat at a game. Whether it is a board game or backyard sports, there is a process that determines the winners and losers of games. The cheater tries to circumvent that process by securing a result without going through the lawful process. He is taking something that he has not earned with his labor or effort. Therefore when a pattern of cheating is recognized in the lives of children it may be time to address them from the Bible on this issue.

Manipulation

Manipulation is another common way that children steal, although not always easy to spot. The manipulator is not involved in theft, in the sense that they convince someone to voluntarily hand their possessions over, however the reason behind the behavior is the same. For example, theft can take place by manipulation. I remember when I was a young teenager, we had just moved to Canada

from the Netherlands and I was eager to get my hands on some Canadian dollars. To obtain it, I sold a piece of cheap candy to a young boy who had no concept of the value of money. He saw candy and he wanted it. The dollar bill in his hand was of no value to him. As an older child I convinced him to buy the candy and a highly inflated price. I took advantage of my ability to manipulate him to unfairly relieve him of what was rightfully his. Thankfully my parents learned of my actions and corrected me appropriately. In the same vain, many children learn they can easily deprive their younger siblings of a smaller coin by showing them a much larger one of lesser value. For example, they may convince a younger sibling to trade a penny or nickel for a dime. After being caught, the offending child may appeal to the fact that their victim agreed to the transaction, so it is not stealing. However, because the biblical idea of theft deals with the motivations of the heart, the motive to further his own desires at the expense of his neighbor makes his action theft.

When a child convinces a younger sibling to trade a “little” dime for a “huge” nickel, the manipulator wants that dime. The problem for him is that it was either not given to him, or he did not work to earn it. Instead of applying proper work to obtain his own dime, the child uses a slight-of-hand approach. He knows his victim has no understanding of the value of a dime versus the value of a nickel and so he takes advantage of that ignorance for his own gain and the detriment of his friend or sibling. At the very least, he is not treating his victim as he would like to be treated himself. He is not looking out for his neighbor’s good, but seeking to further his own at another’s’ expense. Children must be taught this correlation by their parents to prepare them for a proper perspective of private property.

Therefore the prohibitions of this commandment will include fraud, kidnapping, extortion, bribery, breaking contracts, and any other activity that seeks a person’s own glory at the expense of his neighbor.

Emotional Theft

Children can also steal emotionally. Perhaps a child has competed in a race and won it. He comes exuberantly to show his parents his blue ribbon. If his sibling’s response is to say, “You weren’t even close to the record,” or “Last year I ran this race faster,” what they are doing is stealing the celebration from their brother or sister. This kind of behavior also manifests itself if a child is in the middle of an exciting story and the sibling jumps in right before the climax and finishes it for them. This same kind of stealing when a child ruins a surprise party or present for his sibling, or perhaps telling how the movie ends. In these moments, God has given one child a special moment to rejoice over and his sibling wants to take that away, deriving satisfaction by stealing the special moment of his brother or

sister. These acts of unkindness are not based around building up the people involved. When behaving in this way, the child is not loving his neighbor as he would like to be loved.

I am certain parents will be able to add to this very limited catalogue of offenses themselves. The point is not to give an exhaustive list of ways that children transgress the eighth commandment. Rather the idea is for parents to begin the process of thinking through these manifestations so that they would not allow their children to become comfortable with breaking the eighth commandment. They are helping their children to recognize the God-given limits of behavior so that their family would rightly glorify and enjoy God. As a note of caution, parents should never be surprised when children try to engage in these kinds of behaviors. They have inherited their parents' sin nature including the selfishness that has taken up residence in man since the Fall. They may have even learned specific behaviors from their parents, even through sins that the parents have not even realized they are committing. However, just because behavior is not surprising does not mean it is therefore acceptable. Parental response to a child's sin is what will make a difference in their lives. Below there are some considerations as to how parents might be able to be faithful to the Lord as they carry out the responsibilities he has given them.

How to Correct

Proper discipline of a child is not a monolithic, one-size-fits-all exercise. Different corrections are warranted for different transgressions. God does this very thing when he gives Israel the code of laws they are to follow as a nation. Murder is a capital offence, whereas theft requires restitution. By providing varying punishments, parents, are not engaging in a relativistic view of ethics. These varying consequences assign a value to the different behaviors of the child. By relating the consequence to the action the child learns the severity of sinful choices. If parents would neglect teaching in this way, they neglect the tangible experiences that help their children make sense of their verbal instructions. To fail to give consequences is like hoping a child will learn about numbers by parking them in front of their favorite educational television show. Instead parents are called to do the hard work of teaching them by giving consequences. This same truth applies to helping children learn about theft and the different forms it may take.

Addressing stealing and manipulation, the Scriptures give a perfect model for how to reprove children. Assuming children are at an age where they can understand, parents will need to teach or re-teach, the principles of theft laid out in this chapter as part of correction. However, verbal reproof alone is not sufficient to address this behavior. Actions have consequences and the most logical way to address the issue of theft is through the process of restitution as it is laid out in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament it says, "If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five

oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.”² I think I am making a safe assumption that most today do not have many oxen or sheep in our home. If they do own livestock, it is very likely that their children are not trying to take one or two of them when you are not looking. However, the principle being taught here still is a clear and helpful tool to show children the hardship that comes with the sin of stealing. It is good to require the principle of restitution from children. In doing so parents will be making a clear connection between the consequence and their action. If the child has taken food without asking, mom can take him to the grocery store and require him to purchase fourfold what they took from the pantry. Throughout that process they will not forget why they are shopping. The child will be able to make a clear connection between sin and consequence. He will learn he has unlawfully diminished someone’s private property, so he must correct by improving their victims private property. Of course, this consequence only works if a child has his own money to pay for replacement groceries. Parents can use wisdom as to the specific form correction to take in their own family. With little ones, three or four years old, who are just able to understand what they are taught, they will likely not have the skills or means to make restitution in the way presented in Exodus. Parents may have to help them. For example, if they take their sister’s coloring book and fill in all the pages with their scribbles, dad may take them to the store, help them choose a replacement, buy it, take it home, wrap it up and have them give it to their sister. As children get older and get their own little piggy banks or savings accounts, parents can tell them they need to purchase some new books themselves. The children must learn that, if they are to steal, in the final analysis they will lose rather than win.

The second common example of theft we looked at above was cheating. It was described as using deceptive ways to get a good test result or win a game is equivalent to stealing. The problem in correcting this sin is that nothing can be given back to compensate. Parents cannot mandate that they would lose the next four games they play, so they must employ different methods. When it comes to tests, the consequence is more obvious. The child should receive a failing grade. If the children are home-schooled parents may increase the punishment by making the child re-do the entire chapter, including the test. The severity of the consequence will depend on how often this child has engaged in this sin. At the same time, the positive principle to be taught is a work-ethic that values effort and honor rather than a passing grade written on the page. Parents should make sure their children know they love them no matter what their grade might be, as long as they are doing their best. Teach them God’s prohibition against stealing and encourage them to do all their work for God’s glory, not their own. Help them to see the value of learning and re-affirm their commitment to honor God in all of life. Although cheating in games is similar in nature, the setting is quite different. School is work

² Exodus 22:1 (ESV).

for most children, while games are play. Since their approach to each activity is somewhat different, correction of cheating at games will take a different form.

The root behind the sins of cheating on tests and at games is the same: the person is seeking to glorify self. Therefore positive instruction to children will be much the same. Parents can incorporate the Biblical principle of removing temptation into their correction here. Jesus teaches his disciples to remove themselves from temptation when he says, “And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.”³ Parents may have to sit down with their children who struggle with cheating during games and explain to them that they are valuing winning the game over honoring God. It would be foolish of to foster the cheater’s behavior in the home. Therefore, until they demonstrate some self-control in this area, they will not be able to play the game. When giving a consequence like that parents will have to find some ways to allow the offender to be tested in this area. First parents must train themselves to recognize positive fruit in this area. . When the child is able to cheer for the success of another, they probably are ready for a more extensive “test-drive” in this area, perhaps in the form of a closely supervised, short game. When parents are able to observe their growth in restraining sin in this area, we will be able to give them more and more freedom until their full privilege to play games is fully restored.

Of the four different examples of theft in the home giving in this chapter, the fourth way, denying emotional joy, is the most difficult to spot and address. However, parents can take steps when recognizing their child deliberately has ruined the happiness of another. In a negative since parents will need to bring some sort of punishment to bear on the child’s life. If he has spoiled the ending of a movie, the child may need to miss the next movie the family watches together.

I remember as a young teenager vacationing in England with my family. My older brother and I were left to watch the younger children as my parents ran some errands. My parents left, as their final instruction, that we were not to turn on the television under any circumstances. Their instruction was clear and I nodded with what I hoped was an appropriate level of gravity as I waited for them to leave. I knew that I was going to turn on that television as soon as they were out the door. That is exactly what I did. I became so engrossed in what I was watching I did not hear them return, and was caught watching television. As soon as I was caught, I knew what would happen. There was a movie scheduled to be shown on television later that evening that I really wanted to watch. That consequence, combined with my parents’ continued diligent teaching from the word of God, helped me learn. That is the parental goal: to give children the experience that helps them understand what they have been taught. When children knowingly do what they know to cause disappointment to his

³ Matthew 18:9 (ESV).

siblings or friends they are, in fact, stealing the delight others might have in the moment. They are being unkind because they do not wish for their friend or sibling to have what they do not. The most logical connection to make for the child is to deny them in a similar circumstance. Deprivation of a privilege can be very effective in those cases. More than just giving consequences, parents must also work at instilling the positive opposite behavior into our children. That means instead of envying the blessings other people receive we ought to teach our children to work at adding to the blessings of others.

Parents may want to take the time to have their older child read a story to a younger sibling. They may teach their children to ask questions about the lives of the people they interact with instead of only talking about themselves. Parents may teach them about the great joy of listening to a story. They may talk to them about doing to others what they would like to have done to themselves. All these things work together at fostering an attitude of respect and concern for the well-being of another. The eighth commandment is in the second table of the law, dealing with the commandments that guide our behavior to our fellowman. Jesus summarizes positive obedience to these commandments by saying that "...whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." A child's emotional thievery show most clearly their deficiency in understanding this principle.

Conclusion

The task of parenting is never an easy one, no matter how much we would like it to be so, and try to find ways to simplify the task. In a book format it is impossible to give specifics for every single instance parents will encounter when it comes to stealing. Children are creative little sinners and they will introduce new ways of stealing to the home. It is the parents' job to know the biblical principles behind stealing, seek to practice obedience to the eighth commandment in their own lives, and repent when they fail. When parents do those things they will be diligent in leading their children. This leadership is provided through positive instruction first and foremost. Children must know what they should do. Negative consequences are also important. I have only given a few examples in this chapter in the hope it helps parents think through some of the situations they will encounter. Remember, the correction parents bring into their children's lives only exists to point them away from the sinful behavior they have chosen and toward their merciful God.

Study Questions

1. How does the principle behind tithing help understand the commandment about theft?
2. From *Westminster Larger Catechism* #142 on page 121, find three examples of breaking the 8th commandment that surprised you and explain how they are rightly included in considering obedience to it.
3. What is the most common manifestation of theft in your home? How have you sought to address it?
4. What is the common motivation behind cheating and manipulating. How would you address a child that has sinned in this way?
5. What is the opposite virtue to theft. How can you promote that behavior in your home?

