

Lesson 32: Questions 78, 79, and 80

In our last lesson we considered the seventh commandment: “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” We saw that it requires the preservation of our own and our neighbor’s chastity in heart, speech, and behavior, and forbids all unchaste thoughts, words, and actions. The seventh commandment therefore governs the whole realm of human sexuality according to God’s good created order. As we move through the second table of the Law, a pattern is emerging: God governs and protects the fundamental relationships and goods of human life:

- 5th commandment: honor and authority
- 6th commandment: life
- 7th commandment: chastity and marriage
- 8th commandment: property

78–80

Question 78: What is the eighth commandment?

Q. Which is the eighth commandment?

A. The eighth commandment is, Thou shalt not steal.

“You shall not steal.” (Exodus 20:15, ESV)

Like the sixth and seventh commandments, the eighth is remarkably brief. And like those commandments, we would badly misunderstand it if we restricted it only to the most obvious outward act named.

“You shall not steal” certainly means that we may not take something belonging to another person without lawful right. Burglary, robbery, shoplifting, and direct theft clearly violate the commandment. But the commandment comprehends an entire moral category concerning property and material possessions.

We have already established this interpretive method.

“You shall not murder” does not merely prohibit first-degree murder.

It places human life under the protection and preservation of God’s Law.

“You shall not commit adultery” does not merely prohibit one particular sexual act.

It places human chastity and marriage under the protection and preservation of God’s Law.

The eighth commandment works the same way.

“You shall not steal” places property and possessions under the protection and government of God’s Law. It therefore governs not only whether I physically take my neighbor’s possessions, but how property is acquired, preserved, used, exchanged, increased, diminished, and transferred.

This is an important feature of the second table. Each commandment establishes duties I owe to my neighbor, but because that same law binds my neighbor, it also establishes something I may rightly expect from him. I may not unjustly take his life, violate his chastity, or diminish his property, and neither may he do those things to me. God’s Law governs the relationship in both directions.

The commandment also necessarily recognizes the legitimacy of private property. If nothing may properly belong to one person rather than another, then stealing becomes an incoherent category. Scripture routinely distinguishes what belongs to one person from what belongs to another (Acts 5:4).

But private property does not mean absolute ownership independent of God. The earth and everything in it ultimately belongs to the LORD (Psalms 24:1). Whatever we possess, we possess as creatures and stewards under His authority. God may command what we do with what He has entrusted to us.

So the eighth commandment protects real human property without turning property into an idol.

Our possessions belong to us in relation to our neighbor.

Our possessions belong to God in relation to Him.

That distinction will matter as the catechism develops both the positive duties and the negative prohibitions of this commandment.

Question 79: What does it require?

Q. What is required in the eighth commandment?

A. The eighth commandment requireth the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.

The catechism now draws out the positive duty contained in the commandment. Notice its careful wording: “the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others”.

“Thou shalt not steal” does not mean merely, “Leave everybody else’s stuff alone.” It commands active faithfulness concerning material goods. Just as the sixth commandment requires lawful endeavors to preserve our neighbor’s LIFE, and the seventh requires us to preserve our neighbor’s CHASTITY, the eighth requires appropriate concern for our neighbor’s PROPERTY. And because this law binds my neighbor as surely as it binds me, I may rightly expect him to pursue his material good lawfully rather than increasing his estate through my unjust loss.

FIRST, we are required lawfully to procure and further our own outward estate.

Jacob asks Laban, “*when shall I provide for my own household also?*” ([Genesis 30:30](#)). Paul later states the duty of household provision with tremendous seriousness ([1 Timothy 5:8](#)). Scripture does not treat responsible provision as greed. Providing food, shelter, clothing, and other legitimate necessities for ourselves and those entrusted to our care is part of ordinary Christian faithfulness.

That normally requires work. God placed Adam in the garden to work it before the fall ([Genesis 2:15](#)). Paul commands Christians to work quietly and earn their own living ([1 Thessalonians 4:11-12](#)). Work is therefore not merely an unfortunate means of obtaining money. Honest, productive labor belongs to God’s good ordering of human life.

But notice the word “lawful”. The eighth commandment does not merely tell us to increase our estate. It tells us to do so lawfully. Profit does not sanctify the means by which it is obtained. A man may not enrich his household through fraud, exploitation, theft, sexual immorality, dishonest business, or some other violation of God’s law and congratulate himself for being a good provider.

Christian provision must remain Christian.

We must also steward what God provides. Scripture commends diligence and prudent care while warning repeatedly against wastefulness. Wisdom considers resources, prepares for the future, pays what is legitimately owed, and uses material blessings rather than consuming them thoughtlessly.

SECOND, the commandment requires us to further the outward estate of others.

“If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. (Leviticus 25:35, ESV)”

Here Scripture commands assistance to a brother who becomes poor. That is a genuine moral obligation, but we should keep our categories clear. Family provision, private generosity, ecclesiastical mercy, contractual obligation, and civil justice are not interchangeable things. Poverty by itself does not prove that someone else has committed theft, and inequality of possessions by itself does not prove injustice. But neither may the Christian use the legitimacy of private property as an excuse for hard-hearted indifference. The eighth commandment requires love.

Remember, the sum of the 2nd table is “love your neighbor as yourself.”

The Old Testament case laws make this beautifully concrete with respect to fellow Israelites.

“You shall not see your brother’s ox or his sheep going astray and ignore them. You shall take them back to your brother. And if he does not live near you and you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall stay with you until your brother seeks it. Then you shall restore it to him. And you shall do the same with his donkey or with his garment, or with any lost thing of your brother’s, which he loses and you find; you may not ignore it. You shall not see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and ignore them. You shall help him to lift them up again.” (Deut. 22:1-4, ESV, emphasis added)

Exodus 23 goes even farther. If you encountered the lost ox or donkey of your *enemy*, you were to return it. If his donkey collapsed under its burden, you were to help him with it (**Exodus 23:4-5**).

Think about what God is teaching.

It is not enough to say, “I did not steal my enemy’s donkey.”

Love says, “His donkey is lost. *Though he is my enemy*, I will *love* him by returning it.”

It is not enough to say, “I did not damage my enemy’s property.”

Love says, “His property is endangered. *Though he is my enemy*, I will *love* him by preserving it.”

That is the positive force of the eighth commandment.

The catechism also cites **Genesis 47:14,20**, an initially unusual proof text. Joseph was entrusted with the economic administration of Egypt during the famine, and in that calling he managed resources in such a way that Pharaoh’s estate was increased. The point is not that every feature of Egyptian famine policy becomes a universal model for civil government. Rather, Scripture recognizes that faithfully managing and furthering material interests entrusted to us can itself be a legitimate duty. The Westminster Larger Catechism similarly places these verses under our duty, by just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the outward estate of *others*.

That principle reaches ordinary modern life.

Employees should care for company property.

Employers should pay agreed wages faithfully.

Borrowers should return what they borrow and pay what they owe.

Lenders should exercise their rights justly and mercifully.

Sellers should represent goods honestly.

Buyers should pay what they agreed to pay.

Neighbors should protect rather than damage one another’s property.

And where we have wrongfully taken or withheld what belongs to another, biblical justice ordinarily requires **RESTITUTION**.

Exodus 22 requires thieves to restore what they stole, sometimes with additional restitution proportionate to the injury caused (**Exodus 22:1-4**). Leviticus likewise requires restoration when property has been obtained through robbery, oppression, or fraud (**Leviticus 6:1-5**).

We do not mechanically reproduce every penalty of Israel’s civil administration. But the *general equity* is clear. Where possible, justice repairs the material wrong. Repentance seeks to *preserve* our neighbor’s property by restoring whatever was taken unlawfully.

Question 80: What is forbidden in the eighth commandment?

Q. What is forbidden in the eighth commandment?

A. The eighth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever doth or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbour’s wealth or outward estate.

The negative requirement is deliberately broad. The eighth commandment forbids “whatsoever doth or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbor’s wealth or outward estate.”

FIRST, the commandment forbids unjustly *hindering* our own outward estate.

This may sound strange at first. How can we steal from ourselves?

The catechism's point is not that every foolish purchase, failed investment, expensive hobby, or bad financial decision becomes theft. Scripture does not give us permission to label every form of economic foolishness an eighth-commandment violation. But we are stewards of what God gives us, and our material decisions affect duties we owe to others.

Paul's warning concerning failure to provide for one's household appears again here ([1 Timothy 5:8](#)). Proverbs commends productive labor while warning that chasing worthless pursuits brings poverty ([Proverbs 28:19](#)). The man devoted excessively to pleasure consumes his estate rather than governing it wisely ([Proverbs 21:17](#)). Gluttony and drunkenness likewise tend toward poverty ([Proverbs 23:20-21](#)).

These passages are not teaching that Christians must maximize wealth.

They are teaching that waste, idleness, addiction, and irresponsible consumption may eventually make us unable to perform duties God has actually given us.

- A father cannot excuse reckless squandering by saying, "It was my money", when his children lack necessities because he consumed the resources entrusted for their care.
- A debtor cannot knowingly dissipate the means of repayment and then treat his creditor's loss as someone else's problem.
- A steward cannot deliberately waste what was entrusted to him and claim that no theft occurred because he never physically carried anything away.

At the same time, we must distinguish poor stewardship from actual injustice.

- Debt is not automatically theft.
- Poverty is not automatically evidence of laziness.
- A business failure is not necessarily sin.
- A person may suffer genuine loss through illness, disaster, economic conditions, or ordinary providence without violating the eighth commandment.

The catechism says "unjustly".

That word matters.

SECOND, the commandment forbids every unjust means by which we hinder our neighbor's outward estate or enlarge our own at his expense.

Direct theft is the obvious example, but Scripture repeatedly identifies less obvious forms.

Dishonest weights and measures are condemned because the transaction appears legitimate while secretly cheating the other party ([Leviticus 19:35-36](#); [Proverbs 11:1](#)). Fraudulent representation is theft wearing business clothes. Withholding lawful wages is likewise condemned.

Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. (James 5:4, ESV)

An employee may steal from his employer, and an employer may steal from his employee.

The employee steals when he takes property, falsifies hours or expenses, intentionally claims payment for work he did not perform, or deliberately misuses resources entrusted to him. This does not mean that every unproductive minute is theft. Human beings are not machines. But deliberate deception concerning labor for which we are being paid is an eighth-commandment matter.

The employer steals when he knowingly withholds wages owed, cheats workers concerning agreed compensation, manipulates accounts to avoid legitimate obligations, or uses superior power to defraud those dependent upon him.

The same principle governs contracts and commerce.

We may not lie about what we are selling.

We may not conceal defects we are morally obligated to disclose.

We may not alter measurements, quantities, invoices, or records in our favor.

We may not exploit another person's ignorance or desperation through deception.

We may not damage another person's property or livelihood simply because we dislike him.

We may not knowingly receive or retain stolen property ([Proverbs 29:24](#)).

And we may not treat another person's *labor and time* as though they have no value merely because the property taken was not a physical object. A useful question for self-examination is:

Do I value my neighbor's time in the same way I desire him to value mine?

The point is not to keep an account of every inconvenience others cause us, but to examine whether we ourselves presume upon their time as though it were ours to spend.

Scripture also condemns economic oppression. Amos rebukes merchants who manipulate measures and prices in order to exploit the needy ([Amos 8:4-6](#)). James condemns wealthy men who withhold the wages of laborers ([James 5:4](#)). Micah condemns those who covet fields and then seize them through superior power ([Micah 2:1-2](#)).

Notice how other commandments often cooperate with the eighth.

Abuse of authority (5th) may *enable* theft.

Violence (6th) may *accompany* theft.

Sexual immorality (7th) may *coerce* theft.

False witness (9th) may *conceal* or *facilitate* theft.

Covetousness (10th) may *motivate* theft.

Ahab's theft of Naboth's vineyard required abuse of royal authority (5th), murder (6th), false accusation (9th), and covetousness (10th) before the property finally changed hands ([1 Kings 21](#)).

Sin rarely respects the neat boundaries of our catechism headings.

But the distinctive concern of the eighth commandment remains clear: we may not unjustly seize, withhold, destroy, diminish, or manipulate what God has lawfully placed in another person's stewardship.

This requires careful judgment in modern economic questions.

- A price we dislike is not theft.
- A wage we wish were higher is not theft.
- A profitable business is not automatically exploitative.
- A wealthy person is not automatically greedy.
- A poor person is not automatically righteous (or foolish).
- A debtor is not automatically dishonest.
- An unequal economic outcome is not automatically unjust.
- And, to the disappointment of many: taxation is not automatically theft.

Scripture recognizes differing possessions, inheritance, labor, profit, poverty, wealth, gifts, obligations, generosity, and voluntary exchange. And it places these under God's sovereignty.

The moral question is whether property is acquired, retained, transferred, and used *righteously*.

This is why Paul's command to former thieves is such a beautiful summary of the eighth commandment:

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. (Ephesians 4:28, ESV)

Notice the complete transformation.

Stop *taking*. Start *working*. Then start *giving*.

The gospel-shaped opposite of theft is not merely hands that *stop* stealing.

It is hands that *start* working so they can start *giving*.

Question 80 therefore leaves very little room for a respectable church member to say, "I have never robbed a store, so this commandment has little to do with me."

It examines the way we work, the way we buy and sell, the way we borrow and repay, the way we treat employees and employers, the way we use entrusted resources, the way we respond to our neighbor's need, and the way we handle whatever material goods God places into our hands.

Conclusion

Questions 78 through 80 teach us that God governs our property, possessions, labor, and material dealings with one another.

78. **The commandment itself** is simple: “Thou shalt not steal.”
79. **What it requires** is broader: the lawful procuring and furthering of the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.
80. **What it forbids** is equally broad: whatever unjustly hinders our own or our neighbor’s wealth or outward estate.

Take this lesson with you in three ways.

- **FIRST**, pursue your own material good **lawfully**.
Work honestly.
Provide faithfully.
Pay what you owe.
Keep your word.
Use what God has entrusted to you with wisdom rather than waste.
Lawful profit is not greed, and private property is not selfishness.
But everything we possess remains under God’s authority, and we may never increase our estate through fraud, exploitation, deception, or another person’s unjust loss.
- **SECOND**, deal with your neighbor’s property **righteously**.
Do not take what is his.
Do not damage it.
Do not withhold what you owe him.
Do not deceive him in wages, contracts, prices, measurements, loans, or promises.
And where you have materially wronged someone, make restitution where you can.
Biblical justice seeks not merely to condemn the wrong, but to repair the injury.
- **THIRD**, seek your neighbor’s material good **cheerfully**.
The eighth commandment does not stop at “leave his stuff alone.”
If his property is endangered, help preserve it.
If he is in genuine need, help him.
If he works for you, treat him justly.
If you work for him, serve faithfully.
Even if he is your enemy, his property does not become fair game.

That is why **Ephesians 4:28** is such a fitting Christian pattern:

- Stop stealing
- Labor honestly
- Have something to share

The eighth commandment calls us to become people who can be trusted with property, money, work, contracts, debt, possessions, and responsibility.

We are to pursue productivity without greed, prosperity without exploitation, justice without harshness, and generosity with cheerfulness.

And in all of it, we remember that everything we possess is ultimately a gift from God and must be used under His authority for His glory and the good of our neighbor.