

Word #8: Hands off what isn't yours

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[0:00] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we say that it is by your word that light is given to the eyes of our hearts, that our hidden faults might be revealed.

And it is your word that also changes us as we are shown the glory and the grace of our Lord Jesus. So by your spirit, Lord, convict and refresh us today that we might become people who truly are different from the world.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. Now, one of the things that I dislike most about modern life is how many passwords and PIN numbers I have to remember.

Well, just have one password and PIN number then, Pastor, I hear you say. But have you ever had an experience like the one I had several months ago?

You know, there I am trying to access my banking app when, through a slip of the hand, I somehow get the capital letter of my password wrong. Okay, never mind.

[1:09] Let's try again. But the next time I try, they tell me, Sorry, you are locked out. You've got to change your password. And you can't use your old one anymore.

And that has happened to me enough times now that I've got more lock-in details than I can keep track of. But have you ever wondered, why do we need so many PIN numbers and passwords in the first place?

Why have OTP codes and two-factor authentication? Indeed, why do we bother with steering wheel locks and car alarms, or padlocks on your front gate and security tags on your luggage?

Isn't it because we know people steal? Back in the ancient world, many of Israel's neighbors certainly knew that.

That's why they had such detailed laws concerning theft. They got really fussy about it. Take the Hittites, for instance. Here is one of their laws put into modern language.

[2:22] If anyone steals a bull, he must pay 15 cattle in return. Five two-year-olds, five yearlings, and five calves.

And then the law goes into great detail about what counts as a bull. It's pretty interesting. A calf that still isn't being weaned isn't a bull, nor is a one-year-old, but apparently a two-year-old is.

So everyone knows theft is wrong. And everyone had laws about it. In that regard, the eighth word is not unique.

But look at how God says it. Whereas the Hittites are long-winded, he keeps it really simple. You shall not steal.

Full stop. He doesn't specify what you must not steal or when you must not steal. Or from whom you must not steal.

[3:25] Its simplicity sets the scope. In those four words, God is saying, don't take anything from anyone, at any time, for any reason, if it isn't yours.

All right, Pastor, thanks for the history lesson, you might say. But don't worry, none of us are thieves.

If anything, we are the victims, not the perpetrators. That's what I thought too. But by now, I hope you've noticed a pattern with each of these words.

Each one is deeper than it looks. You shall not murder, reach all the way down into our anger.

You shall not commit adultery, reach past our actions into our lustful intentions. And the eighth word is no different.

[4:33] That's why Martin Luther dared to say, and here I paraphrase him, stealing is far more common than we like to admit. It's everywhere.

And yet we've become so used to it that we barely notice it. And if everyone who steals, but would never think of themselves as a thief, were punished as a thief, we would soon run out of people,

executioners, and even gallows.

Wow, what a thing to say, isn't it? So this morning, once more, we are going deep. And as we dig deeper into the eighth word, we will see that it presses us in three directions.

Firstly, don't take what isn't yours. Secondly, be an honest laborer. And thirdly, give because you have been given much.

And as we dig, we might find God shining his light into our hearts in a way that might be a little uncomfortable.

[5 : 44] But if that's your experience, remember he does so only because he wants to dispel the darkness. So let's start at the beginning.

Don't take what isn't yours. And let's begin by stating something obvious. For theft to exist, there has to be such a thing as personal property.

Otherwise, if nothing belongs to anyone, this command doesn't make sense. Now, of course, scripture teaches that everything ultimately belongs to God.

Psalms 24 verse 1 says, The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it. We will come back to this thought later.

But this verse doesn't mean people can't own things. Think, for instance, of Abraham buying a field from the Hittites in Genesis 23 so that Sarah has her own burial site.

[6 : 55] Later, when Israel enters the promised land, God gives the tribes specific portions of land to possess as their own.

So even though scripture never explicitly speaks of property as a right, it clearly recognizes personal ownership. What is yours is yours and what is mine is mine.

And the eighth word tells us hands off what isn't yours. Didn't God make that clear from the very beginning? In the Garden of Eden, God said, eat freely from any tree.

Enjoy it all. But there is one tree that isn't yours. Hands off that one. But what did Adam and Eve do?

They ate the fruit that was not theirs to eat. In that sense, they stole from God. And that helps us see what stealing is.

[8 : 04] God gives and God sets boundaries. He gives some things to us and he gives other things to other people. Stealing is crossing that boundary.

Taking what God has not given us or taking what he has given to someone else. That's why this word stands so close to the tenth word.

The tenth word says, I want what isn't mine. The eighth word says, I take what isn't mine. So, hands off what isn't yours.

And first and foremost, hands off people. In the Old Testament, the most serious theft was that of human beings.

Exodus 21 verse 16 says, Anyone who kidnaps someone is to be put to death whether the victim has been sold or is still in the kidnapper's possession.

[9 : 10] The word translated kidnap here is actually the same word as the one translated still in the eighth word. And the punishment is especially severe.

Why? Because a human being is not property. When you take a man, you have not merely damaged his estate, you have taken him.

You have violated his freedom, his dignity, his God-given humanity. And sadly, modern slavery isn't just a distant historical detail, or a headline from overseas, it is right on our doorstep.

In Malaysia today, an estimated 202,000 people live trapped in conditions of modern slavery and forced labor. From vulnerable migrant workers trapped by debt bondage on palm oil plantations and construction sites, to domestic helpers whose passports are illegally confiscated, to young people trafficked into online scam syndicates, people made in the image of God are still being taken and treated as a commodity.

Now, no single person can tackle every injustice in this world, and God doesn't call you and me to be the Messiah, care. But he does call us to care.

[10 : 54] So, if we can treat the migrant workers we interact with kindly, or if we have the opportunity to support ministries fighting human trafficking, or if we can remember the vulnerable in our prayers, we are beginning to obey the spirit of the eighth word.

We can't do everything, but we must never let our hearts grow cold to what grieves the heart of God. But of course, that's just the tip of the iceberg.

to adapt an image used by the pastor Colin Smith, it is helpful to think of each command as a railway track with many stations on the line.

In the case of the eighth commandment, the last station would be where the passengers are kidnapping and trafficking humans, and most people will never visit that station.

But, if stealing is fundamentally about desiring and taking what isn't yours, it becomes clear all of us have traveled somewhere down this line.

[12 : 17] So let's take a look at some of these other stations. Beyond kidnapping, this command obviously covers property.

Exodus 22 maps that out in detail. And at this point, some of us might be tempted to steal now.

After all, none of us are planning to slip items at the shops into our pockets later today.

Right? I sincerely hope not. But is it true we have never stolen? what about that office stationery that somehow always comes home with us, even though it's not stated that's actually allowed?

Or the Bible study resource that comes with a license for one person, but we photocopy it for 20. It's for the Lord, right? many of you might remember the movie The Passion of the Christ, which came out just over 20 years ago.

Apparently, shortly after the time it was released, it became the most illegally downloaded movie.

Now, given that it was a movie marketed at Christians, who do you think might be downloading them?

[13 : 52] That is theft too. Because it's taking what isn't yours. Okay, but what about the following?

You get home from shopping at Aeon, and you realize the cashier has given you 20 ringgit too much. Nobody noticed. Do you go back?

Or the restaurant leaves an expensive item off your bill. You spotted it, but nobody else did. What do you do? Or a parcel arrives at your house by mistake.

You could keep it easily enough and tell yourself, it isn't your fault that they sent it here, it's Shopee's fault. Is that your cause of action?

After all, in none of those scenarios did you take anything. The money was accidentally handed to you, the parcel was accidentally delivered to you, our hands never move.

[15 : 01] But listen to what God says in Deuteronomy 22 verses 1 to 3. Do not ignore it.

Do the same if you find their donkey or cloak or anything else they have lost.

do not ignore it. Do you hear what the law requires? If you find a string, ox, you don't ignore it.

You take responsibility for it, look after it, and return it if the owner can be identified. In other words, God doesn't say, it's not a problem since you didn't take it.

Instead, he says, it belongs to your neighbor, so try your best to get it back to them. You still have a duty to respond rightly when something belonging to another person comes into your possession.

[16 : 18] And that means the eighth word is not only about what our hands take. It's also about what our hands keep.

If it belongs to your neighbor, you have no right to hold onto it. And it doesn't stop there.

The eighth word also addresses what happens when our actions cause someone else to lose something. Have a look at Exodus 22 verses 5 to 6.

If anyone grazes their livestock in a field or vineyard and lets them stray, and they graze in someone else's field, the offender must make restitution from the best of their own field or vineyard.

If a fire breaks out and spreads into torn bushes so that it burns sheaves of corn or standing corn or the whole field, the one who started the fire must make restitution.

[17 : 25] Here we have two ordinary examples. Your animal wanders into your neighbor's field and eats his crops. Or you light a fire and it spreads and destroys his field.

Or perhaps today you might say it destroys his air quality. You didn't necessarily set out to steal his harvest, but your actions cause him a loss.

And God's answer is simple. Make restitution. temptation. That has some very practical implications for us.

Suppose you rent an Airbnb and spill something on an expensive carpet. Or you break an appliance. Maybe it was an accident.

The temptation is to check out, say nothing, and hope that they don't trace it back to you. Or suppose you are reversing out of a crowded parking space and hear a little bump.

[18 : 35] You get out, see a scratch on the other car, look around, and realize nobody saw you. And you think it's barely anything, right?

The temptation is just to drive off. But whose carpet is it? Not yours. Whose car is it? Not yours. And the eighth word says, don't make your neighbor pay for your mistake. If you cause the damage, take responsibility for it.

Leave your details. Tell the owner. Pay what it costs to put it right. Because integrity isn't just refusing to steal.

It's being willing to make right what our actions have taken from someone else. A similar idea is present in Exodus 22 verse 14.

[19 : 42] If anyone borrows an animal from their neighbor and it is injured or dies while the owner is not present, they must make restitution. earlier, the issue was our property causing a loss to our neighbor.

Here, the situation is reversed. Our neighbor's property is in our hands and we damaged it. And that matters. You borrowed the animal and it was injured or died on your watch.

You had permission to have it. You didn't have permission to be careless with it. So you pay. Many years ago, when I was still in the UK, I borrowed a book from someone.

Somehow or other, I kept it, forgot about it, and by the time I moved back to Kuching, I realized it was still with me. At first, I did nothing.

What was I supposed to do? Besides, I told myself, oh, it's been many years. She'll never miss it. But my conscience kept gnawing at me.

[20 : 55] Eventually, I found her on Facebook and sent her a message. I apologized and offered to buy her a replacement. Very graciously, she told me that that wasn't necessary.

Instead, she suggested, oh, just buy someone else a book. And that was incredibly gracious of her. But it didn't change the fact that I had taken something that belonged to someone else.

I still needed to acknowledge what I had done. I still needed to take responsibility. It was her decision to release me from the debt.

That is important because sometimes we excuse ourselves by imagining that the other person wouldn't mind. We say to ourselves, it's only a small thing.

They were not using it anyway. They can't afford it. But the eighth word doesn't say, don't take what isn't yours, unless the owner won't miss it.

[22 : 06] It says, you shall not steal. So before we move on, let me ask you, is there something you have that isn't yours?

Is there something you have damaged that you haven't taken responsibility for? what belongs to your neighbor?

And what are you going to do about it? Hands off what isn't yours. But the eighth word doesn't actually stop there.

You see, when the Bible deals with a thief, it doesn't simply tell him to stop, it puts him to work. And so here's the second way we keep this word, be an honest laborer.

In Luke chapter 3, our second Bible reading today, huge crowds come to John the Baptist to be baptized. John tells them to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

[23 : 21] So three times different groups ask him, what shall we do? Let's look at how John responds to the last two groups first. To the tax collectors, he doesn't say, quit your job.

He says, don't collect any more than you're required to. And to the soldiers, he says, don't extort money. Be content with your pay.

Now, what is John doing? He's showing us repentance repentance isn't just about stopping the wrong thing, it's learning to do the right thing.

The tax collector is tempted to take more than he's entitled to. So John says, take only what is yours, what you have authority to collect.

The soldier is tempted to use his power to take what isn't his. So John says, be content with what you've been given.

[24 : 30] That's yours. That's the fruit of your honest work. So what about us? If we truly want to live by the eighth word, and do what is right, what shall we do?

Let's start where most of us spend most of our waking hours at work. When an employer hires you, you are making a trade.

They hand over their money, and you hand over your time and effort. It's a relationship built on trust. So the question is not just, did I physically show up at my desk today?

It is, is my boss actually getting what they paid for? Because let's be honest, you can steal from your boss without ever touching a single cent from the cash register.

It happens when our one-hour lunch break mysteriously stretches almost to two. It happens when we spend the whole afternoon scrolling through social media or working on our side hustle as we use their time for our projects.

[25:55] The apostle Paul had a fantastic word for this when writing to the Christians in Colossians 3. He calls it eye service. You know what that is, right?

It's working hard the second the manager walks past your screen and switching off the moment door closes. And how do we justify it?

We tell ourselves they're a big company anyway. They won't miss an hour. Or maybe we say my salary is too low so I'm just leveling the paying fee.

But the eighth word strips away our excuses. Taking time you were paid to give is still theft. And Christians, we need to be especially careful here. Yes, gospel ministry is ultimate.

[26:59] It is very important. But if we are using our work time in such a way where we are effectively stealing from our employer in the name of ministry, God wouldn't be pleased with that.

He doesn't regard that as a good witness. So give full value to the work you were hired to do to the best of your ability.

Don't give more than that. That would be idolatry. But don't give less either. That would be idleness. God wants us to be an honest laborer. But of course honest labor deserves honest wages.

So employers don't get a pass. Listen to Leviticus 19 verse 13. Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.

[28:12] You see Deuteronomy 24 tells us that when a man is poor he is counting on that money to eat tonight. So pay them before the sun goes down.

Don't make the contractor who finishes the job still wait for payment six months later. Don't be the employer whose domestic helper's salary comes only when you get round to it.

Indeed, don't demand more hours from your employee than you are willing to pay them. For scripture makes clear how God feels about honest labor not getting honest wages.

James 5 verse 4. Look, the wages you failed to pay the workers who mow your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.

If we ignore the cries of these workers for an honest day's wage, God will hear it, and he will judge.

[29:23] So be an honest employer. Don't steal. you. And that applies not just to our workers, but our customers.

Leviticus 19 verse 35 to 36 says, Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight, or quantity. Use honest scales and honest ways, an honest ephah, and an honest hint.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. Again, don't take what isn't yours to take and give what is owed.

So, if the quotation is inflated simply because the client looks like he's really rich and can afford it, rather than because there is an honest rate for the work, the eighth word is being broken.

Or if the work isn't even yours at all, you are stealing if you take credit for it. So students, if you have taken someone else's work, even chat GPTs, and said that it's all yours, that is wrong.

[30:47] So hands off what isn't yours, and be an honest labourer. But let's come back to Luke 3.

Remember the crowds who came to John? There was one more group we haven't looked at yet. They also asked, what shall we do? And John says, verse 11, anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none.

And anyone who has food should do the same. You see, here is where following Jesus gets really radical.

I'm pretty sure most of us here agree we should work hard and work honestly. But let me ask you, why do you do so?

Is it so you can be financially independent and retire early? Is it so that you can take exotic vacations in your later years? Is it so you can live in your dream house?

[32:02] Now, none of those things are necessarily wrong. There is nothing sinful about enjoying the fruit of honest labor. But none of those is the ultimate reason the Bible gives us for why we work.

John has just given us a clue what that might be. And Paul makes it crystal clear in Ephesians 4, verse 28. anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer but must work doing something

useful with their own hands that they may have something to share with those in need. I remember when I first properly read this verse. We mustn't steal. Sure. We must work. Sure. But then I got to the last part of this verse and it stopped me in my tracks that they may have something to share with those in need.

Do you see what Paul is saying? The thief doesn't just stop taking. He starts working. And why does he start working?

[33 : 30] So that he can start giving. That is the transformation the gospel brings.

The hands that once took now become the hands that supply. That is the ultimate aim of the eighth word.

which brings us to our third point for today. Give because you have been given much. You see, the world tends to think about possessions in absolute terms.

What's mine is mine. I earn it. I own it. I can do whatever I want with it. But is that how Christians should think about what we have?

There are some indications in scripture that it isn't. Take Leviticus 23 verse 22. God says, when you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest.

[34 : 42] Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the Lord your God. Now stop and think about that.

The corners of the field are still your field. You planted what's there. You watered it.

You harvested it. The grain in those corners are yours. And yet God says, leave it for the poor and the foreigner.

Why? Well, remember what we saw earlier in Psalm 24 verse 1, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it.

In other words, that field might belong to you, but if you belong to God, you can never say, it's mine, therefore I can do whatever I want with it.

[35 : 47] You see, whether you realize it or not, what we have, strictly speaking, is not given to us to own in any absolute sense.

Instead, what you have has been entrusted to you by God. Your money, your possessions, your abilities, your opportunities are really gifts placed in your hands for you to serve him and share with others.

And if that is true, then keeping what God gave is not merely stinginess, it's theft.

That's why in Malachi 3, when the people withheld the tithes, what does God say? Why are you robbing me?

Not merely, why are you so greedy? Why are you so selfish? Though that's probably true too. No, they are charged with breaking the eighth word.

[37 : 06] Because ultimately, if we withhold from God, what belongs to God, which isn't just the tithe, by the way, but every part of us, we are robbing him.

We are refusing to give what God wants to use for the work of his kingdom. You see?

In the end, what is the eighth word actually all about? It isn't just saying, hands off what isn't yours. It's also saying, hand off what is yours. Because what is yours is what God put in your hands to use for his glory.

Now, I know this has been a hard-hitting sermon. If this morning, you're sitting there, feeling exposed, then God's law has done its job.

[38 : 35] That's exactly what it's meant to do. But here's the thing about the law. It can expose us, can condemn us, but it can't rescue us.

It can't transform us. We won't automatically move from being takers to givers, just by hearing, don't steal.

So how can that happen? Can it? By God's grace, it can. When we become aware, we have been given so much.

You see, as our creator, God gave. Before Adam had done any work, God had already given him a garden to live in.

He hadn't earned any of it. God had planted the garden, filled it with abundance and beauty, and then put Adam there and told him to enjoy it.

[39 : 45] The giving came first. And that hasn't changed. In Acts 17, Paul told the Athenians that God gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

Think about that for a moment. The air that you're breathing right now, the heart that is beating without you telling it to, even the mind you are using to follow what I am saying, all of it is given to you.

You don't have to worry because God always provides what we need. He gives. But more than that, as our redeemer, God gave.

If someone stole something from you, what would you do? You would close your hands, wouldn't you? You would be extra careful not to hand them anything else on a plate.

Well, the law shows us all too often, we take what isn't ours, including from God. But what did God do?

[41:00] He opened his hands. He gave again. And this time, he gave his son. And the son is just like his father.

You see, Jesus had every right to take, didn't he? He was in very nature God. But that's not what he did. And you know what?

All too often, we hold back what we should give. Well, in light of our sin, Jesus had every right to hold back.

And he didn't. He gave it all for us. Everything this commandment ask of us. He did.

And then look where he ended up. Centuries ago, Isaiah said he would be counted among the law breakers. And that's exactly what happened.

[42:09] He hung on the cross amongst thieves in their place, bearing what thieves deserve so that thieves could go free.

And even as he hung there, he was giving. You see, one of the criminals had worked it out.

Right there, as he hung alongside Jesus, he said, we are getting what our deeds deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong. And then he made a request.

Jesus, remember me. Now remember what this man has in his hands. Nothing. And he's asking for something that isn't his, something he doesn't deserve.

And Jesus doesn't tell him, hands off what isn't yours. Instead, he hands over what indeed is his and says, paradise is yours.

[43:24] That's exactly the same thing that happens to us when we trust in Christ. As 2 Corinthians 8 verse 9 says, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

And my friends, Jesus says, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. And if you know what Christ has done, will you not treasure him?

Will he not be where your heart is? And if Christ is where your heart is, will your hands also not follow?

Will you not take, but give, because you have been given so, so much? You see, my friends, Ephesians 4 verse 28 is really the eighth word in New Testament form.

Let me read it one more time. anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work doing something useful with their own hands that they may have something to share with those in need.

[44:51] That is the word we still live by. Why? Because Ephesians 5 verse 1 to 2 tells us, follow God's example, therefore, as dearly love children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

That's why. So let us not take what isn't ours. Let's be honest laborers and let us give because Christ gave himself.

That's how we love our neighbor. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, this morning your word is indeed searching.

It is cutting to our hearts. And Father, this morning we just want to come to you and we just want to say sorry. We want to repent when sometimes we have taken what is not ours, especially from you.

Or sometimes we withhold what is your right to ask from us. And so Father, would you convict us this morning and indeed if there's something that we need to do, go and do to make things right, I pray that you will give us the strength and the courage to do so.

[46:35] And Father, we thank you again because we know that you have given the Lord Jesus to us and we can rest in his grace, in the assurance of his pardon.

And Father, we know that as those who belong to you, we want to do what you ask us to do. We want to be those who are clearly marked as those who are in your kingdom.

So please help us to be different. Help us to obey the eighth word as you want us to. We pray all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.