Section: Commands (Law)

**TEACHING NOTES**

**Q52. Why does God give the eighth commandment: You shall not steal?**

So we will be content with what we have and seek to be generous.

**Exodus 20:15** “You shall not steal.”

**Ephesians 4:28** (NIV1984) He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

**Hebrews 13:5** Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

**Acts 20:35** “... remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

Good evening Disciples Church. I’m excited to share with you the next commandment, the eighth commandment. Let’s begin by reading the catechism question and answer: Q52. Why does God give the eighth commandment: You shall not steal? So we will be content with what we have and seek to be generous.

## Introduction:

The eighth commandment is likely one of the commandments at surface level that you may be inclined to think you’ve got down. I mean, when was the last time you walked into Walgreens and stole a soda or a candy? This is likely not very common for many of us. In our pride, we may be tempted to simply just sit back and check out.

But, before you do that, and by now in the commandments series you’ve learned to *not* do that, turn with me to Exodus 20:15.

The commandment is simple, the text says, “You shall not steal.”

What is the surface meaning of the Eighth Commandment? Well, don’t take what is not yours. That is the negative implication of the commandment. The positive implication is that we make efforts to steward rightly the possessions that God gives to us, for His glory.

Let’s look at the Heidelberg Catechism, and see how it deals with the prohibition in this commandment:

* Q. 110. What does God forbid in the eighth commandment?
	+ He forbids not only outright theft and robbery, punishable by law. But in God’s sight theft also includes cheating and swindling our neighbor by schemes made to appear legitimate, such as: inaccurate measurements of weight, size, or volume; fraudulent merchandising; counterfeit money; excessive interest; or any other means forbidden by God. In addition he forbids all greed and pointless squandering of his gifts.

I would venture to admit that even this summary statement in the Heidelberg Catechism is still fairly shallow in what the commandment exhaustively covers.

With that warning, let’s jump in. I’m going to initially walk us through the Heidelberg’s answer piece by piece, talking about the negative and positive application of these points. I will then focus on our catechism answer. Finally, I will finish with application and gospel exhortation.

## Part 1 – Forbidden: Theft & Robbery

Let’s look at the beginning of the Heidelberg Catechism question: Q. 110. What does God forbid in the eighth commandment? He forbids not only outright theft and robbery, punishable by law.

Let’s stop and consider theft and robbery.

The Webster’s Dictionary of 1828 states the definition of theft as, “The act of stealing. In law, the private, unlawful, felonious taking of another person's goods or movables, with an intent to steal them. To constitute theft the taking must be in private or without the owner's knowledge…”

And robbery as, “In law, the forcible and felonious taking from the person of another any money or goods, putting him in fear, that is, by violence or by menaces of death or personal injury.”

We see an important distinction between theft and robbery. The act of theft is the unlawful taking of another’s goods done without the owner’s knowledge, whereas robbery is the violent act of stealing. Robbery and theft are prohibited, they are blatant violations of this commandment. But, what are the underlying concepts at work here?

This commandment presents 2 fundamental concepts:

First, God apportions for us in His economy of stewardship, personal property. You cannot steal something that does not exist. God creates the world with ‘stuff’ and that stuff is given to us by God. We have possessions, and these possessions are not someone else’s.

Secondly, these possessions are not to be taken unlawfully. If God does not institute law that makes clear that what is given to one man is not another man’s, then you cannot have the principle of theft or robbery.

To the first point, praise God that he allows for us to have possessions. This is part of His command on all of us to steward rightly His creation for His glory. When we care for and manage our possessions rightly, this brings glory to God.

From the start of scripture, we see God instituting various creation mandates, one of which is to exercise our God given dominion over the earth through work: Gen 1:28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Secondly, we are to respect and uphold the governmental laws that prohibit the unlawful taking of another’s possessions. In America, our laws are mostly consistent with God’s moral law. Theft and robbery are illegal, just as they are sinful in God’s eyes.

But, what about a communist society? In a communist society, there is no personal possession. Everything is owned by the state. In this case, the Christian would need to continue to steward God’s good creation, but also submit to the state.

Though they may submit to the state in regard to personal property, they are still bound to God’s commandment. They are not to support the thieving laws of the communist government, nor should they directly participate in stealing goods from others.

Christians, whether they live in a capitalist, socialist or communist society are should *not* support laws that encourage theft in any way, shape or form.

There is complexity here for sure, I’m not saying that the poor malnourished farmer ought to reject food given to him that the communist government ‘re-allocated’ (stole) and gave to his family. No, in that sort of situation, it is wise to care for self and family, in accordance to the 6th commandments positive requirement that we make every effort to care for our life and the lives of others. I am saying that the farmer should not adopt a posture of stealing from others just because it’s commonplace in a communist society.

There is a greater testimony here that ought to be drawn out. So often, as Christians, we are in moral conundrums where God’s moral law may be difficult to discern in our present context. In these circumstances, God calls us to live lives of open handedness with our possessions. If the state can take what they want, then so be it. It *does not and shall not* affect our testimony in Christ. If we suffer, then we suffer with Christ. If, in God’s sovereign timing, He allows you to live in a country that allows for personal possession, then we submit to that government and praise Him that the state is in accordance with His law.

## Part 2 – Forbidden: Cheating

Let’s consider the next form of stealing that is prohibited in this commandment, look with me again at the Heidelberg Catechism:

“He [God] forbids not only outright theft and robbery, punishable by law. But in God’s sight theft also includes cheating…”

The second table of the law deals with how we ought to treat our neighbor. And so, let’s think about how cheating and/or swindling our neighbor treats our fellow man. Cheating is volitional illegitimate deception. Indeed, cheating is violating the rules in order to gain advantage from someone or something.

Perhaps cheating reminds us of 4th grade when Johnny copied Sally’s spelling test and got an ill-deserved A. Now, that is indeed sinful and a violation of the 8th commandment, but let’s look deeper.

How many of you have been the victim of fraudulent credit/debit card charges? Is this not a type of cheating? The perpetrator used a trick (computer hacking, phishing, etc.) to manipulate a computer or financial system in order to steal currency.

What about in sport? Cheating in sport amounts to using illegitimate means to get a leg up on your competition and thus giving you an unfair advantage. Think about Lance Armstrong, formerly one of the premier cyclists in the world. A man who many looked to as an example of someone who had conquered cancer and moved on to achieve amazing physical accomplishments. Following his cancer recovery, he won an unprecedented seven consecutive Tour De France cycling races. He eventually admitted to sophisticated doping in 2013 and was stripped of all of his Tour de France titles. Those who had looked to him as an example of perseverance through difficulties had been duped, he tricked them, he tricked the world.

What about Adam and Eve? Did they not attempt to cheat God in their pride? The serpent tempted Eve by saying, “For God knows that when you eat of it (tree of the knowledge of good and evil) your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” You can imagine, in Eve’s mind, the seed of a cheat had been planted. She would *know* something that God had previously not shared with her. The temptation to acquire knowledge through illegitimate means is indeed a cheat. Yes, God did give Adam and Eve knowledge of good and evil, but at what cost? A cheat is utilizing an unlawful method to gain something. In this case, it shows the absolute non-trusting attitude that Adam and Eve had in regard to God’s provision, sustenance and sovereignty.

The positive aspect here is that we should make efforts to follow the rules. We should not desire to cheat a system. We should encourage our spouses, our children, and others to submit to God’s way as the correct and righteous way.

Foundationally, it’s very important for us to see that cheating always harms ourselves and our neighbor. Academic cheating can get you thrown out of a college, it can bring shame to your family and friends. Cheating a financial institution can bring legal repercussions and cause financial damage to those inflicted. Cheating in sport can ruin your career and cause many who have looked up to you to no longer trust you. Adam and Eve’s grave sin brought condemnation to the entire human race. Sin is never done in a vacuum; it always damages our relationship with God and our relationship with our neighbor.

## Part 3 – Forbidden: Swindling (defrauding)

Let’s consider the next form of stealing that is prohibited in this commandment, look with me again at the Heidelberg Catechism:

“But in God’s sight theft also includes cheating and swindling our neighbor by schemes made to appear legitimate, such as: inaccurate measurements of weight, size, or volume; fraudulent merchandising; counterfeit money; excessive interest; or any other means forbidden by God.”

This portion focuses on a type of stealing that uses schemes made to appear legitimate.

The intent behind defrauding is to gain access to anything through means that employ deception.

What in our lives could fall into this category of sin?

I think, for many of us, one contemporary example would be cheating on your taxes. Now, some of you may say that our government is violating this commandment by imposing on us exorbitant taxation. While that may be true, that is not the primary focus of this point. The focus of this has to do with you. Do you falsely report your income? Do you falsely report your deductions? Are you gaming the tax system to get a bigger refund? If so, then you are violating this commandment.

Years ago, around the time of my conversion, I started to feel the Holy Spirit’s conviction in my life to *stop* lying about our income so that my wife could receive WIC government assistance. With that program we received milk, cheese, bread and formula for our children.

At another time, I also felt that same conviction when it came to reporting our income to PG&E. If we made too much money, we wouldn’t qualify for the CARE program. This program basically gave us less expensive electricity. The driving factor behind all of these decisions was mistrust of God’s provision and sovereignty in my life. I didn’t think we could afford not to have these extra discount/handout provisions. I was violating God’s command. I was swindling PG&E and local governmental agencies.

The foster system, the welfare system, etc. are all designed for specific reasons. And while we may have some issues with how these systems are run, that does not give us the freedom to falsify the truth in order to receive something illegitimately.

There needs to be an encouragement to the Christian here: our foundation is in Christ, even if that means we have expensive electricity. Our foundation is in Christ, even if that means we have to pay for our own milk, cheese, bread and formula. Our foundation is in Him, even when we make the changes to our spending habits to make our lives conform to Christ exalting righteousness! His way is always better than our way.

What about commerce or business? Do you own a business? If so, then doing a poor job or the bare minimum and still charging exorbitant prices would be a form of swindling. As a business owner, are you advertising a result that you’re intentionally not committed to? These are further examples of violations of the 8th commandment.

What about marketing? Now, I’m not willing to say that all marketing is a form of swindling, but I know that some marketing is. Billboards and TV ads that employ powerful psychological trickery as a means to swindle you into purchasing their products could easily fall in this category!

Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, violated this commandment in a particularly damaging way. It was not common for women to smoke cigarettes in the early 1900’s, and Edward Bernays, who worked in marketing for a tobacco company, employed powerful and deceptive marketing through psychology to trick women into smoking. He linked smoking to thinness by using photography, film, newspapers and magazines to show pictures of thin, attractive and healthy actresses and models smoking. When he linked cigarettes to health and thinness, it enticed women in droves. The sinful inclination of human nature is that we are drawn to temptations that we believe will provide us with results.

Although many thousands of women started smoking after his initial ad-campaign, women were still reticent to smoke publicly as it was seen as taboo. Bernays would go on to link cigarettes to “torches of freedom” by calling women to smoke in public as a means of rejecting the so called ‘repressive and patriarchal’ society in which they belonged. He wove radical feminism into his marketing. He understood sinful inclination and used powerful marketing to tempt women into cigarette use.

All of these ad-campaigns were just that, they were ad-campaigns from a company that desired to grow its wealth.

We should be on the lookout in our culture not to be defrauded by false advertisements that play on our sinful inclinations.

What about excessive interest? Indeed, through the American housing crisis and recession in 2008, we’ve seen the wreckage that predatory loan practices mixed with greed from both the lenders and the buyers creates.

Kevin DeYoung says, “When you see people who have come upon hard times and you think, “Here’s an opportunity for me to get rich from their misfortune”—that is what the eighth commandment forbids. We are to think, “I have extra that I could loan them without interest so that they can get on their feet.”

As Christians, we should make every effort to not defraud our neighbor. Indeed, Christ frees us to love our neighbor.

John 4:19-21 We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

## Part 4: Forbidden: Greed & Pointless Squandering

Finally, the Heidelberg Catechism says, “In addition he [God] forbids all greed and pointless squandering of his gifts.”

At the heart of this commandment is the inner desire to have that which is not ours. All sin is in essence a form of greed. Adam and Eve wanted what was not theirs. Our desire to covet, commit adultery, murder, etc. all stem from greed.

Again, as we’ve talked about previously, God calls us to live lives of proper stewardship. We are not to squander that which God has given us.

## Love of Money

I want to talk specifically for a moment about the warning that scripture gives us for the love of money and possessions. I believe that given our current cultural context, this is a needed reminder for us.

If you think you’re not rich, then consider this. According to one source, if you make a salary of $20,000, then you are in the top richest 3.65 % in the world. If you make a salary of $80,000, then you are in the top richest 0.10 % in the world. Even the homeless in America are wealthy by the world’s standards.

According to one source, there are 2,350 bible verses about money. This is staggering.

Let’s take a look at a few of those verses:

1 Timothy 6:9-10 ESV But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

Proverbs 28:25 ESV A greedy man stirs up strife, but the one who trusts in the LORD will be enriched.

Proverbs 15:27 ESV Whoever is greedy for unjust gain troubles his own household, but he who hates bribes will live.

Hebrews 13:5 ESV Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Luke 12:15 ESV And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

Matthew 6:24 ESV “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

Finally, let’s look at what Jesus says in Matthew: Matt 19:24-26 ESV Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Some may be tempted to say that money rules the world; that perhaps it is the means by which kings are made and by which kings fall. But, money can be a false god, it has no intrinsic power in and of itself. The desire for money stems from man, not from money.

Think of kings, presidents, billionaires – how many of these men of prestige are professing faith credibly? The numbers are small. Why is that? We must ask, “What effect do possessions have on us?”

If you are in service to money as a false god, then you will often do everything and anything to protect it. And, money is a particularly divisive master because it provides man with instant earthly prestige and power.

In the Matthew verse, we see Jesus make the point that it is quite difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Why? Why would it be difficult for a rich many to enter the kingdom of God?

The Christian life is marked by dying to self and treating all of what we have as God’s and not ours.

Listen to the word of Christ on this: Mark 12:41-44 ESV And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

It’s easy for a rich man to donate large sums, because he’s giving only a limited percentage of his massive fortune. But notice the poor widow, she gives all of her wealth. Her actions reveal her true desire to give wholly to the Lord. Without spiritual regeneration, it is impossible for the rich man to give the painful amount; he would not give up all that he has in order to serve God.

God is not calling us to give up all of our wealth, no – he is asking that we put it in the proper category. The Mark passage is dealing with a right placement of sacrificial living. We should always be diligent not to let our money control our worship, rather our worship and service to God ought to control our money. Money is not an idol to be worshipped, it is something that God has blessed us with that we ought to steward for Him.

So, what warning should we take from this? First, God will sovereignly adopt and save many who have wealth. Prior to conversion, the wicked sinner cannot and will not truly overcome his covetous nature. Secondly, as American Christians, we must be diligent to be on guard, always seeking out the true motives of our heart. It’s imperative that we invite others into our lives so that we can be challenged and admonished in this area.

Let me try to give you a few examples. Are you planning on moving to get a higher paying job? Then get counsel. Perhaps you don’t need the extra money, if it means that you would have no faithful Christian community to walk with you.

Husbands, are you wanting to bring your wife home to care for the home and be the primary teacher of your children? Then are you getting counsel to see what you can cut from your expenditures in order to make that a reality?

You see, often – we chase money because it’s what everyone else does in our culture. We must see that when we conform to the culture, we run the risk of being indoctrinated by the culture. We are called to be set-apart, we are called to submit to Christ and His lordship.

## Word of Truth Catechism Review

I wanted to spend a bulk of time tonight pulling apart the Heidelberg Catechism portion to give us a faithful framework to dig deeper into the 8th commandment. Let’s now take a look at our own Word of Truth Catechism:

**Q52. Why does God give the eighth commandment: You shall not steal?** So we will be content with what we have and seek to be generous.

As you’ve seen tonight, this question is not just about *not* stealing. That is the negative implication of the commandment. But, the positive commandment for Christians is that we would be content with what we have. That contentment births an open-handedness with our possessions.

Let me draw our attention to the early church account in Acts:

Acts 4:32-35 ESV Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

You see, the Christ enabled sacrificial living that we see in Acts is not meant to be an anomaly. It is the position of the people of God and the Church to live in such a way that we give freely of our possessions *because* God has freely given us salvation.

How are you doing with this personally? Are you known for your contentment with what God has given you? Are you known for being generous, looking to bless others with your resources; such as your time, your talents, and your possessions? Are you faithful to give your resources in the local church, for the mission that God has given?

Ephesians 4:28 (NIV1984) He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

Acts 20:35 “... remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

Let our testimony in these things be distinctly Christian, because we have all we need in Christ!

## Gospel Exhortation and Conclusion

Let me finish with this:

Luke 23:39-43 ESV One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

At the cross Christ was hung next to an impenitent robber and a repentant robber.

Jesus, the God-man, Lord of Lords, King of Kings – hung next to two lowly sinners. These men were guilty of violating the 8th commandment. These men, both deserving of God’s wrath, both guilty. And what commandment was Jesus in violation of? None. But what does he say to the repentant thief? “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Beloved: Money, stuff, possessions, it’s all for nothing if it is not stewarded for God. It cannot save. It can possibly give you temporal relief from the suffering of this world, but even that temporal relief is not guaranteed. But notice what Jesus said to the thief, he said, “You will be with me.” If we trust in the Lord by faith, then we will be with Christ. Not only will we be with Him in glory, but we will be given the indwelling Holy Spirit so that we can fight back the idolatrous desires that continue to haunt God’s people in this fallen world.

We can only do this by God’s grace!

So, when we’re tempted to steal, over desire money or possessions, desire to misrepresent ourselves so that we get more or cheat, work more hours than you should, chase some dream at the cost of Christian living, and so on, let us see that we profane the name of Christ by openly walking in disobedience. Was His blood spilt for nothing? Let us, who have been sanctified by Christ not walk in darkness. Let us walk in light. Let us work for our fellow man to give without desire to get, to be content with what we have, to live lives that are open-handed and Christlike.

Let’s pray.