

Q. 78: What is the eighth commandment?

A. *The eighth commandment is, "You shall not steal."*

- **Stealing, theft, and robbery.** *Theft* is the unlawful taking away of the personal goods of another. *Robbery* is theft by use of violence or intimidation. *Stealing* at its basic level includes thefts and robberies, but includes more than what magistrates might consider unlawful.
- **Private property.** Embedded in the eighth commandment is the right to and the goodness of private property. All things ultimately belong to God. See Ps. 24:1; Deut. 10:14; Ps. 50:10-12. God has delegated ownership over lawful possessions to men. See Gen. 1:26-28; Ps. 115:16; Ananias and Saphira, "While [your property] remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? "To subdue the earth is our human calling. This is the basis of the right of ownership."¹ Acts 2:44 and 4:32 do not teach common property, but only voluntary common use. Both Scripture and our confession (2LCF 27.2) teach against communism, which advocates common ownership of the means of production and aims to eliminate private property and social class by distributing wealth to each person according to the government's judgement of their needs.
- **The division of ownership of all property.** Some things are *common* to all (air, water, sea, etc.), some things are *public* (rivers, ports, the use of the banks of rivers, etc.), some things belong to *no one* (things religious, sacred, and holy), but the largest majority of things belong *privately* to people. Yes, all things are ultimately the Lords, however, we own them as his stewards.²
- **Exchange of property ownership.** Christians should remember that their property will not always be theirs. *Remember that your private property will not be yours one day.* Goods and property are transferred sooner or later from one person to another. No one holds onto his property forever, for we all die. And most things we now possess will transfer to new owners long before we die. *All private property will exchange hands through either righteous means or unrighteousness means.* Either by violence or force, against the will of the owner, or by inheritance, contract, agreement, according to the will of the owner. This takes the form of buying and selling, borrowing and lending, donating, leasing and renting, mortgaging, trusts, partnerships.³
- **Stealing deserves punishment.** Magistrates ought to punish stealing (Rom. 13:3-4), but God will ultimately punish stealing. "[Neither] *thieves*, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor *swindlers* will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:10).

¹ Bavinck, Reformed Ethics, 2.458

² Drawing from Zacharias Ursinus' commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism.

³ These categories could be further nuanced (e.g. war, righteous seizure of property, etc.), but this serves our purposes well.

1. What is forbidden in the eighth commandment?

Q. 80: What is forbidden in the eighth commandment?

A. The eighth commandment forbids whatsoever does or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbor's wealth or outward estate.

- **Unjustly hindering our own wealth and outward estate.** The prodigal son “gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living” (Lk. 15:13). What is ours is a stewardship from God, and when we squander and waste, we are robbing from God. Some practical ways we can squander and waste are: gambling, idleness (Pr. 24:23), unbridled pursuit of pleasure and entertainment (Pr. 21:17), addictions (Pr. 23:20-21), unwise cosigning of a loan (Pr. 22:26-27), and keeping close company with the wicked, lazy or robbers (Pr. 28:19). Hoarding and not giving leads to our poverty (Pr. 11:24; 28:22).
- **Unjustly hindering our neighbors wealth and outward estate.** Theft is not merely material, but time, diligence, and effort devoted to his products. Some ways we break this commandment include: piracy of songs, plagiarism, dodging parking tolls, infringing on patents, evading taxes, lotteries, gambling, false weights and measures (Lev. 19:35; Deut. 25:13; Prov. 11:1; 20:10; Ezek. 45:9-12; Mic. 6:11), child trafficking, frivolous lawsuits, intentionally defaulting on your loan, dishonest bankruptcies, dishonest insurance claims, 'borrowing' through purchase and return, lying on loan application about your income, borrowing and depreciating through negligence, pilfering, breaking something in a store and not seeking to remedy it (Ex. 22:5), pets ruining a rental and not paying back (Ex. 22:5), payday advance or hard-money lending to the poor to trap them or take advantage of them (Ex. 22:25-27), not giving to God the first fruits of your income (Ex. 22:29-30), not paying employees promptly (Deut. 24:14-15), overusing volunteers without pay (Deut. 25:4), incurring debts and not paying them off (Exod. 22:7; Ps. 37:21; Prov. 3:28; Ezek. 18:7), printing money and causing inflation removes value of an economy's currency and wealth.

2. What is required in the eighth commandment?

Q. 79: What is required in the eighth commandment?

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

- **Lawfully procuring our own wealth or outward estate.** “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” (Eph 4:28). “[A]spire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one” (1 Thess. 4:11-12). Seek to provide for yourself and your children, and your grandchildren (Pr. 13:22).
- **Lawfully procuring our neighbor's wealth or outward estate.** Jacob benefitted Laban by increasing his wealth, “For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now when shall I provide for my own household also?” (Gen. 30:30).