

Stealing


Exodus 20:15; Ephesians 4:28



Do Not Steal

Read Exodus 20:15: The eighth commandment says, “You shall not steal.” To “steal” means “to take that which belongs to another without the owner’s consent or permission.”¹

This commandment is repeated in the Old Testament (*Deuteronomy 5:19; Leviticus 19:11*) and New Testament (*Matthew 19:18; Mark 10:19*). This and the other commandments “are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (*Romans 13:9*)


 *The apostle Paul wrote, “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.” (Ephesians 4:28, NIV)*²

Why People Steal

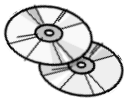
1. Why do people steal?³

How People Steal

Many of us would say, “I do not steal.” But is this really true?

 “...you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal?” (*Romans 2:21, NIV*)⁴

2. In what ways do people steal? Besides stealing money or material property, what other ways do people steal?



¹ Exodus 22 specifies particular types of stealing, along with their related penalties. These include stealing oxen, sheep or other animals (22:1, 4) and stealing silver or goods (22:7).

² Paul is most likely speaking to people who were stealing before they became Christians. Since they have become Christians, they ‘must steal no longer.’ Stealing must *not* be part of the believer’s new life in Christ. Instead they should work so they ‘have something to share with those in need’ – a great change to the thief’s former way of life!

³ Some people defend stealing when the thief is someone in desperate need. Even the Bible says, ‘People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving’ (*Proverbs 6:30, NIV*). However, the passage continues, ‘Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it costs him all the wealth of his house’ (6:31). Agur said to God, “...give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God” (*Proverbs 30:8-9, NIV*). So while stealing by a desperate person may be understandable (and mercy may be extended to them), that does not make it right. Besides, at what point does a person become needy enough to justify stealing? In any case, most thieves are not desperately needy. Other reasons for stealing include selfishness, greed, laziness, lack of faith, thoughtlessness, ignorance, or ‘the challenge of getting away with it.’ Others simply minimize the offense. For example, they say, ‘no one is being hurt;’ ‘they have plenty of money;’ ‘they won’t miss it;’ ‘it’s only a small thing;’ ‘they owe me;’ ‘they don’t really expect people not to do it;’ or ‘everybody does it.’

⁴ Paul directed these rhetorical questions to Jews who made claims of righteousness but ‘did not practice what they preached.’ We too can ‘preach against stealing’ but be inconsistent or hypocritical because we steal things without really thinking about it, or else we excuse our stealing by saying it is different from other stealing.

- We can steal “intellectual property.”⁵ This includes plagiarism⁶ and the unauthorized (*and illegal*) duplication of copyrighted products such as movies, music and software.
 - We steal from our employers when we get paid for time we don’t really work.
 - Others?
3. In what ways do people justify⁷ stealing “intellectual property,” including unauthorized duplication of movies, music, software, etc.? What should the Christian think about it?
 4. Views concerning ownership may vary from culture to culture. Individualistic cultures tend to have a strong sense of individual property rights, while collectivist cultures tend to accept shared ownership of property. In any case, what biblical principles concerning stealing apply to all cultures?⁸
 5. If we steal something, and later realize it is wrong, what should we do?

📖 “Anyone who steals must certainly make restitution⁹...” (*Exodus 22:3b*)



Stealing from God

We steal from God when we withhold what is due him. God is *the* Owner. For example, God has entrusted to us money, time, talents and other resources to be used for his purposes. If we are not using God’s supplies for serving his purposes, we are in a sense robbing God.

📖 *The LORD told his people, “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ In tithes and offerings...” (Malachi 3:8, NIV84)*¹⁰

Reflection/Application

- What do *you* think about stealing? Seek to understand *God’s* will about this. If you have been doing wrong, turn from your sin, ask God for his forgiveness, and do what is right.
- “Doing right” is good. But it must be emphasized that we cannot earn God’s acceptance by our good behavior. Salvation is by God’s grace through faith. Do you need to trust in Jesus?

⁵ ‘Intellectual property’ may be defined as ‘a work or invention that is the result of creativity, such as a manuscript or a design, to which one has rights and for which one may apply for a patent, copyright, trademark, etc.’ (*New Oxford American Dictionary*. Ed. by Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg. Oxford University Press, 2010). This may include ideas, inventions, designs, literary works, artwork, photographs, logos, computer software, etc.

⁶ ‘Plagiarism’ may be defined as ‘the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own’ [that is, without crediting the sources] (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). Plagiarism ‘is commonly practiced by students, but also by teachers who sometimes steal not only the grand ideas of other scholars, but also the work of their own students!’ (Robertson McQuilkin, *Biblical Ethics* [Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1995], 428).

⁷ ‘justify’ – ‘give good reason for, show to be right or acceptable, to excuse.’

⁸ McQuilkin writes, ‘These [cultural] differences do not necessarily undermine the commandment not to steal, for all societies recognize the right of personal ownership and consider robbery a crime... the difference is not in the definition of *stealing*, but in the definition of *ownership*, and when taking what by whom is considered legitimate. Along the borders of definition of personal ownership there is some latitude for a society to establish its own norms, and it is wrong for the Christian in another society [even if not a citizen] to violate those norms.’ (McQuilkin, 430).

⁹ ‘restitution’ – giving back or paying for what has been stolen. For Old Testament examples, see Exodus 22:1, 4. In the New Testament, consider Zacchaeus’ story (*Luke 19:1-10*). Restitution is not always possible or appropriate, but we should always attempt to make things right. We should ask God for forgiveness and do what is right.

¹⁰ This passage applies specifically to Israel (*Malachi 3:6, 9*) but the general principle applies to all of God’s people.