

PROPERTY RIGHTS INHERENT IN THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

ARE NECESSARY FOR HUMAN
FLOURISHING

BARRY ASMUS & WAYNE GRUEDEM

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Extended reflection on the words of the Bible will often yield deeper insight than what is evident on a first reading. This should not be surprising. If we believe that the Bible is the product of the infinite wisdom of God, we will naturally expect that the Bible contains more wisdom than human minds will ever fully understand.

This is certainly true with regard to the 8th Commandment, “You shall not steal (Ex. 20:15).”¹ Our first impression is that the commandment is quite simple. It tells us not to steal, which tells us we should not take something that does not belong to us. It is a simple command, consisting of only four words in English, and only two words in Hebrew: *lo’ tignob*, “You shall not steal.” What part of that do we not understand?

On deeper reflection, however, we will discover that this commandment provides the necessary foundation for all human flourishing on the face of the earth. Governments and cultural traditions violate the 8th Commandment at their peril, for wherever this commandment is ignored,

entire nations remain trapped in poverty forever. When that happens, they tragically fail to achieve God’s purposes for them on the earth.

A. Not stealing implies private property

The command, “You shall not steal,” assumes that *there is something to steal*—something that belongs to someone else and not to me. I should not steal your ox or your donkey—or your car or your cell phone or your iPad—because it belongs to you and not to me.

Therefore, the command, “You shall not steal,” assumes private ownership of property. Other passages in the Old Testament show that God was concerned to protect the private ownership of property. Property was to be owned by individuals, not by the government or by society as a whole. For instance, God told the people of Israel that when the Year of Jubilee came, “It shall be a jubilee for you when *each of you shall return to his property* and each of you shall return to his clan (Lev. 25:10).”

There were many other laws that defined punishments for stealing and appropriate restitution for damage of another person’s farm animals or agricultural fields (see, for example, Ex. 21:28-36; 22:1-15; Deut. 22:1-4; 23:24-25). These were the property that belonged to someone else, and the Jewish people were to honor such property rights. Another commandment guaranteed that property boundaries would be protected: “You shall not move your neighbor’s landmark, which the men of old have set, in the inheritance that you will hold in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess” (Deut. 19:14). To move the landmark was to move the boundaries of the land and thus to steal land that belonged to one’s neighbor (compare Prov. 22:28; 23:10)²

The Old Testament also shows an awareness that governments could wrongly use their immense power to disregard property rights and steal what they should not have. At the urging of wicked Queen Jezebel, King Ahab wrongfully stole Naboth’s vineyard, and had Naboth killed in the process (1 Kings 21). And the prophet Samuel warned the people of Israel of the evils of a king who would “take” and “take” and “take”:

So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will *take* your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself com-

manders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will *take* your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will *take* the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will *take* your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will *take* the tenth of your flocks, *and you shall be his slaves*. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day" (1 Sam. 8:10-18).

Sometimes people claim that the early church practiced a form of "early communism" because it says in Acts, "All who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). But this situation was far different from communism, because (1) the giving was voluntary and not compelled by the government, and (2) people still had personal possessions and owned property, because they still met in "their homes" (Acts 2:46), and many other Christians after this time still owned homes (see Acts 12:12; 17:5; 18:7; 20:20; 21:8; 21:16; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem 2; 2 John 10). Peter even told Ananias and Sapphira that they did not have to feel any obligation to sell their house and give away the money (see Acts 5:4).³

If the 8th Commandment implies private ownership of property, then the focus of the 8th Commandment is different from the other nine commandments. The 8th Commandment covers an entire range of human activity that is not the purpose of these other commandments.

Commandments 1-4 (Ex. 20:3-11) focus primarily on our relationship to God and the duties we owe to God. (The 4th Commandment does require us to labor, but it does not specify what we should labor for).

Commandment 5 protects family ("Honor your father and your mother," Ex. 20:12).

Commandment 6 protects life ("You shall not murder," Ex. 20:13). Commandment 7 protects marriage ("You shall not commit adultery," Ex. 20:14).

Commandment 9 protects truth ("You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Ex. 20:16).

Commandment 10 requires purity of heart ("You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife . . . or anything that is your neighbors," Ex. 20:17). By implication, Commandment 10 also requires purity of heart regarding all the other commandments, but it adds no unique area of life as an additional focus that was not already treated in the previous commandments.

Therefore the 8th Commandment is unique. It protects property and possessions. By implication, we are also right to think it protects another person's time and talents and opportunities — everything over which people have been given stewardship. We are not to steal someone else's property, or time, or talents, or opportunities.

Without the 8th Commandment, therefore, the Ten Commandments would not cover all aspects of life. We would have God's instructions protecting worship, life, marriage, family and truth. But where would the Ten Commandments tell us what we should *do* with our possessions and our talents and opportunities? Yes, the first four commandments would instruct us in the worship of God, but beyond such worship, would we be expected to achieve anything beyond mere subsistence living? Would we be expected just to act as the animal kingdom does: eat, sleep, bear offspring, and die, with no other achievements to show the excellence of the human race created in the image of God?

But the 8th Commandment implies that we have property to care for. Therefore it is the 8th Commandment that sets us apart from the animal kingdom as property owners and those who have been given stewardship of possessions. In that way the 8th Commandment relates to most of our work activity for most of our earthly lifetimes.

B. Private property implies stewardship

If human beings were all alone in the universe, without any accountability to any God, then people might assume that private ownership of property carried no obligations with it. Or, conversely, people might assume that "society" or government should take the property away, lest people use it for their own selfish purposes. This is the view of Communist societies.

But if *God himself* has commanded, "You shall not steal," and if in that commandment *God himself* establishes a system of private property, then it immediately follows that we are accountable to him for how we use that property. This is certainly the Bible's perspective: Our ownership of property is not absolute, but we are stewards who will have to give an

account of our stewardship. This is because, ultimately, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and all those who dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1).

We now have greater insight into the wisdom of God in the 8th Commandment. The command “You shall not steal” implies private ownership of property. And private ownership of property which is given by God implies responsible stewardship and accountability for the use of that property. Once I realize that God commands others not to steal my land or my ox or my donkey, or my car or my laptop, then I realize that I have an individual responsibility for how those things are used. I have been *entrusted* with these things by the God who created the universe, and I must act as a faithful “steward” to manage what he has entrusted to me.

This idea of stewardship also broadens our idea of what God has given to us as stewards. We have been entrusted with much more than merely physical possessions and land. God has also entrusted us with time, talents and opportunities. We have these things as a stewardship from God as well. We are accountable to him for how we use them.

But what if a government takes away this right to own property? Then I am no longer free to act as a steward in deciding how that property is to be used, for I can no longer control the use of that property. Or if a government places burdensome restrictions on how I can use my property, then my ability to exercise stewardship is also diminished.

C. Stewardship implies an expectation of human achievement

There is still more to this idea of stewardship of private property. If God *entrusts* me with something, then he expects me to do something with it, something worthwhile, something that he finds valuable. This is evident from the very beginning when God placed Adam and Eve on the earth. He said:

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And *let them have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and *over all the earth* and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and *subdue it* and have dominion . . . over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:26-28).

The Hebrew word translated “subdue” in verse 28 (Hebrew *kabash*) means to make the earth useful for human beings’ benefit and enjoyment. In this way, God was entrusting Adam and Eve, and by implication the entire human race, with stewardship over the earth. And God wanted them to create useful products from the earth, for their benefit and enjoyment and benefit.

This implies that God wanted Adam and Eve to discover and create and invent products from the earth – at first, perhaps, simple structures in which to live and store food, and later, more complex forms of transportation such as carts and wagons, then eventually modern homes and office buildings and factories, as well as cars and airplanes – the entire range of useful products that could be made from the earth.

Stewardship implies the expectation of expectation of *human achievement*. When God entrusts us with something, he expects us to *do* something worthwhile with it.

Therefore the 8th Commandment gives both the *opportunity* for human achievement (by entrusting property to us), and *the expectation* of human achievement (by making us accountable stewards).

What do we mean by human achievement? The range of human activity is vast: It includes the arts, the physical sciences, technology, industry, commerce, and all of the social sciences and the relationships that we find in family, community, nation and church. Human activity also includes bearing and raising children with all the challenges unique to each child. All of these are areas of human activity for which we have been entrusted with a stewardship.

In addition, the human drive to understand and to create from the world is *unlimited*. Rabbits and squirrels, birds and deer, are content to live in the same kinds of homes and eat the same kinds of food for thousands of generations. But human beings have an innate desire to explore, to discover, to understand, to invent, to create, to produce – and then to enjoy the products that can be made from the earth. This innate human drive to subdue the earth has never been satisfied throughout the entire history of mankind. This is because *God created us not merely to survive on*

the earth but to flourish.

God has created us with very limited needs (food, clothing, shelter) for our physical survival, but he has also created us with unlimited wants. For many centuries, human beings did not know that they wanted cell phones, because such things did not exist. (In fact I lived quite happily without a cell phone for about 40 years of my life, but now I've realized that I want one and I'm willing to spend money to buy one.) When I was growing up as a child in Wisconsin, I didn't realize that I wanted Cherry Garcia ice cream, or pomegranate raspberry frozen yogurt, because those products did not exist. The only ice cream store in my childhood town sold vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry, and what a treat they were! Now we want dozens of varieties.

The same is true of electric light bulbs, plastic water bottles, gas furnaces, air conditioners, automobiles, computers and airplane travel. For thousands of years, human beings did not know they wanted these things, because nobody knew they could be made. In these and thousands of other areas, human achievement continues to progress and thereby human beings give more and more evidence of the glory of our creation in the image of God. With such inventions we demonstrate creativity, wisdom, knowledge, skill in use of resources, care for others who are distant (through use of a telephone or by email), and many other other God-like qualities.

Plants and animals show a measure of God's glory by merely surviving and repeating the same activities for thousands of years, while human beings glorify God by *achieving* much more than mere survival. We glorify God by understanding and ruling over the creation and then producing more and more wonderful goods from it, for our enjoyment, and with thanksgiving to God. God is the one who "richly provides us with everything to enjoy" (1Tim. 6:17). And "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer (1Tim. 4:4). The command "You shall not steal," when viewed in the context of the entire Bible's teachings on stewardship, implies that God created us not merely *survive* but to *achieve much* and to *flourish* on the earth.

God gives us these various stewardship responsibilities so that through them we will have unlimited potential for glorifying him through discovery, creation, production, distribution, and use of potentially unlimited material and intellectual resources.

D. Therefore the 8th Commandment is God's wonderful gift that leads to human flourishing

The ownership of property which is implied by the 8th Commandment gives people the freedom they need to try to be faithful stewards of what God entrusts to them. In addition, ownership of property motivates people to create, invent, and produce, because they have hope of keeping and enjoying what they earn.

Therefore the ownership of property which is implied by the 8th Commandment is *essential for human flourishing*. God in his wisdom gave a command that laid the foundation for human flourishing throughout all ages of human existence on the earth.

E. The immense challenge of the 8th Commandment

Obedying the 8th Commandment rightly is immensely challenging. Only someone made in the image of God can obey it, and even those redeemed by Christ never obey it perfectly in this age.

Now someone might think "I'm not a shoplifter, or an embezzler or a thief. I don't cheat on my taxes. I think I have been obeying the commandment, 'You shall not steal.'"

But have you been a faithful steward? Faithful stewardship of what God entrusts to us requires wise use of *all* of our possessions and time and talents and opportunities.

Faithful stewardship requires use of immense wisdom and mature judgment in the complex balancing of multiple factors such as love of neighbor, care for one's family, wise planning for the future, fear of God, desire to advance God's Kingdom, and a desire to subdue the earth to the glory of God.

Grateful stewardship in obedience to the 8th Commandment also requires avoiding the temptations and sins connected with possessions, such as gluttony, greed, selfishness, materialism, and waste. It also requires that we avoid laziness, apathy and false asceticism. While *self interest* is acceptable in biblical ethics, selfishness and greed are not acceptable, but are distortions of rightful self interest.⁴ The stewardship requirements implied by the 8th Commandment are life-long. They begin in childhood, with the responsibility to care for one's toys and small responsibilities, and they continue until the day of one's death, when we must make wise choices regarding the disposition of any goods that we leaves behind.

Therefore who among us can say from his heart, "I know that I have always made right stewardship decisions. I know that God is pleased with how I've managed my resources. I've made wise investments and judicious allocation of funds between giving to others, investing, saving, and using for my own present enjoyment. I have been a wise steward of all the intellectual, creative, artistic, and managerial opportunities and abilities that God entrusted to me. My talent has made ten talents more"? I doubt any living person could honestly say that today, for, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Therefore the challenge of the 8th Commandment is immense. Hidden within the simple words, "You shall not steal," we discover the infinite wisdom of God. Through these words, God laid the foundation for a system of private ownership of property, of stewardship and accountability, and of an expectation that we would achieve much and flourish as we lived on the face of the earth.

The immensity of this challenge should not discourage us, however. It should excite us that God has entrusted such a great challenge to us. It should excite us to know that God fills us with joy and delight as we seek to accomplish these tasks. In seeking to fulfill the 8th Commandment rightly, we will find opportunities to use *every capacity* with which he has richly endowed us. We will discover the joy of using all of our God-given abilities to express love to fellow human beings through creating business products and services that truly bring good to other people, and (for those who know Christ) also produce much thanksgiving to God.

Therefore the opportunities provided by the 8th Commandment show us God's pathway to human flourishing on the earth, for the glory of God.

F. Governments break the 8th Commandment when they steal private property

We must acknowledge at the outset that governments have a proper authority to collect taxes for legitimate government functions. Paul says that because the civil authority is "God's servant for your good" (Rom. 13:4), "you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed . . ." (Rom. 13:7). Governments have a moral right to collect taxes for the legitimate functions of government, to reward good and punish evil and establish order in society, for Peter says that governors are sent "to

punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good" (1 Peter 2:14).

However, too often in history governments have gone far beyond these legitimate functions. We cannot here define in detail the exact limits of legitimate or illegitimate use of government's power of taxation, but we can point to several examples of governments that have so diminished or abolished private property that they have destroyed human flourishing in their nations. This is because, if people are to exercise stewardship fully, they must have freedom to use their property as they think best. But if government owns or controls all the property, people no longer have freedom to use their property as they think best, and to be rewarded for their effort. Human achievement is thereby stifled and true human excellence will occur rarely, if ever.

Some examples of governments that have broken the 8th Commandment by wrongfully stealing property from their people are as follows:

(1) Communist countries prohibit private ownership of land. Karl Marx said "The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: abolition of private property." Communist countries such as North Korea, Cuba and the former Soviet Union prohibited all private ownership of property such as land and buildings. In doing this, these governments trapped their people in a depressing cycle of poverty.

(2) Socialism is a form of government where individuals can own private homes and have other possessions, but the government owns all of the businesses and factories (what are called the "means of production"). This ultimately restricts and diminishes human flourishing, but it does not destroy it completely.

(3) Some nations prevent private ownership of property because private property is owned by the tribe, not by individuals. This is the system found on most American Indian reservations. It is also the system found in many nations in sub-Saharan Africa. Every nation that has tribal ownership of property is poor, and will always remain poor. This is because tribal ownership of property prevents private property and thus prevents human

flourishing.

(4) Economic historian David Landes, in his book, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*⁶ points out some other examples of nations in past history that prevented private ownership of property. In India prior to the advent of British rule in 1757, local mogul princes had unquestioned regional authority and essentially took from the people whatever they wanted. This system effectively prevented private ownership of property, and thus greatly hindered human flourishing for centuries.

Landes also points out that in China, for many centuries, the Emperor had absolute rule and took whatever he wanted from the people. Once again this system prevented a workable system of private ownership of property, and thus hindered human flourishing for the vast majority of the Chinese population.

Similarly, in Eastern Europe for several centuries the feudal system meant that a few wealthy lords would own all the property and the vast majority of the population were therefore trapped in poverty. The lack of an easily accessible means to acquire private ownership of property meant that human flourishing was effectively prevented for centuries.

(5) Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, in his landmark book *The Mystery of Capital*, points out that documented ownership of private property in many Latin American countries, as well as in other poor countries such as Haiti and Egypt, is made nearly impossible by excessive government procedures and bureaucracy that are designed to keep property ownership in the hands of a wealthy few, and to prevent ordinary people from owning their own property.

In all of these situations, these governments are really “stealing” property from individuals who should have been able to acquire and own their own property. In preventing private ownership of property, these governments removed most of the incentives for people to strive for greater economic achieve-

ment and to flourish as human beings on the earth.

H. Private property and individual stewardship naturally create a free market

When only one individual owns property, there can be no market for buying and selling. But as soon as several individuals in a community each have some property, it leads naturally to trading, and then to buying and selling with what a person owns. This is because individuals naturally seek to better their own situations. When a man who has some bread and no eggs can voluntarily trade with a man who has some eggs but no bread, they find that they both can make an egg sandwich and they both are better off than before. And soon after that, an entrepreneur will arise and realize that he can buy supplies from both of them and sell egg sandwiches to everyone in town. Therefore out of *private ownership of property in a community* there naturally will emerge the amazing mechanism of a free market, with all the benefits of commerce that flow from the market.

I. Conclusion: The 8th Commandment lays the foundation for human flourishing on the earth

When the 8th Commandment establishes the ideas of property rights, stewardship, the expectation of human achievement, and the foundation for a free market, it puts in place the necessary components for human economic flourishing on the earth. Therefore the 8th Commandment provides the moral basis for an economic system that will best lead to the fulfillment of God’s command to Adam and Eve that they should “fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion” over it (Gen. 1:28). Therefore the 8th Commandment lays the foundation for human flourishing on the earth.

J. The attack on property rights and markets from modern political liberalism

The view we have presented above is always under attack, particularly so from those with leftist political convictions. For whatever reason, they continue to glorify the state and strongly favor the politicization of human affairs. Invariably, government is their solution to human problems. But

the more that is controlled by government, the less that is controlled by individual stewardship of property. The profound crossroad facing every generation, then, is to turn either to the collectivist vision which worships the state and political solutions, or to turn to those who lean towards America's great experiment in private ownership of property, and with it individual liberty and "we the people" individual dignity.

The Left's endgame strategy is straightforward. First, generate as much provocative class warfare rhetoric as you can. A good example is the recent Congressional election in New York's District 26. The candidate that won ran endless video clips of a mean man pushing an old lady in a wheelchair off a cliff. The Republican plan for saving Medicare could hurt or even kill old people! Emotionalism and fear still seem to work. Visual stories usually trump written persuasion. Robin Hood stealing from the rich and giving to the poor; the rich not paying their fair share; spread the wealth around; always pitting white vs. black, male vs. female. Wherever there is class, there is room for dividing people.

Next comes the vast assumption that *government* could better control the economy than the *market*. Education, health care, transportation, electric, gas, and water utilities are usually the first to be collectivized.

Clarence Carson in his series of articles entitled "World in the Grip of an Idea," said, "If the twentieth century were a play, it would long since have driven the audience mad. The incongruity between the words spoken by the actors and the action on the stage would be too great to be borne. The actors speak of peace, prosperity, progress, freedom, brotherly love and a forthcoming end to the age-old ills of mankind. The action on the stage has been world wars, dictatorships, class and racial animosities, terrorism and a more general coarsening of human behavior." Carson goes on: "It is possible to grasp what has been happening on a world wide scale by ignoring all the political promises and keeping your eyes fixed on the action and the ideas that are producing it."

Neglecting the Biblical truth of the sinfulness of man is a common, even frequent mistake. Then comes a state promising minimum wage laws, rent controls, price controls, tariffs, subsidized rents, interest rate ceilings, agricultural price supports, federal loan guarantees, passenger rail service subsidies, fixing public utility rates, protecting the right of labor to strike, affordable housing, and even free health care. The never-ending list of entitlements becomes a never-ending list of promises, all of course provided by the state and higher taxes.

But what happens when the *takers* exceed the *makers* and producers are overwhelmed by government planners and economic progressives? Debt, deficits and economic unsustainability could become reality. Unfortunately, a bigger government also means a smaller individual and a smaller citizen; a government big enough to give you all you want is big enough to take everything you have; a helping hand almost always turns into a controlling hand.

Human liberty, by contrast, with its foundation resting on the eighth commandment and the institution of private property, titles, deeds, and a free market economic system, has enormously beneficial consequences. The invisible hand of the market that Adam Smith describes in his *Wealth of Nations* produces order, harmony, coordination, and diversity.

The market is a miraculous instrument of communication and a stupendous transmitter of opinions, while determining value. Producing a singular price resulting from millions and billions of interacting suppliers and consumers, the market becomes a spontaneous and productive social order that is truly a gift from God. The more complex the economy becomes the less amenable it is to human design and conscious direction. But the market continues to function well, ever adjusting, ever adapting to meet human wants with human supplies in seemingly infinite variety.

The market is a self-adapting process, a transcendent galactic bathroom scale producing prices that can meaningfully cause humans to act. It is one of God's common graces that is little understood, but in it lies one key to human progress and freedom.

Without the 8th commandment, we would have protection for none of this. Liberty would be lost and the possibility of human flourishing would be destroyed. To the extent that governments steal property from individuals, they steal the opportunity for human flourishing, and, to that extent, they steal glory from God.

Notes

1. This is the 7th Commandment according to the numbering system used in the Lutheran and Roman Catholic traditions. We have used here the numbering system found in the rest of Protestant tradition and in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The wording of the commandment itself is of course the same, no matter which number is assigned to it.
2. The previous two paragraphs have been adapted from Wayne Grudem, *Politics-According to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010, p. 262).
3. The previous paragraph was adopted from the *ESV Study Bible*, Wayne Grudem, general editor, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), note on Acts 2:44; p. 2085.
4. See the excellent discussion of the difference between selfishness and self interest in Jay Richards, *Money, Greed and God: Why Capitalism is the Solution and not the Problem* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), pages 115-123.
5. Karl Marx, *Communist Manifesto* (New York: International Publishers, 1948), page 23.
6. David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).