



DO NOT STEAL

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A good case can be made that the Eighth Commandment, “Do Not Steal,” is the one commandment that encompasses all the others.

How does “Do not Steal” encompass the other commandments? Murder is the stealing of another person’s life. Adultery is the stealing of another person’s spouse. Coveting is the desire to steal what belongs to another person. Giving false testimony is stealing justice. And so on.

This commandment is unique in another way: It is the only commandment that is completely open-ended. All the other commandments are specific. The Fifth Commandment, for example, states that it is our parents whom we should honor. The Sixth Commandment, prohibiting murder, is about taking the life of an innocent human being. The Seventh Commandment, prohibiting adultery, is also specific – to a married person. Two unmarried people cannot commit adultery. But the commandment against stealing doesn’t even hint at what it is we are forbidden to steal. Which means that we cannot take anything that belongs to another person. And that, in turn, means three big things:

First and foremost, the commandment against stealing has always been understood to mean that we are not allowed to steal another human being – what we call kidnapping. That is why no one who had even an elementary understanding of the Eighth Commandment could ever use the Bible to justify the most common form of slavery – the kidnapping of human beings and selling them into slavery. Critics of the Bible argue that the Bible allowed slavery. But the type of slavery described was in almost all cases what was known as indentured servitude, the selling of oneself to another person for a fixed period of time in order to work off a debt. This had nothing to do with kidnapping free people – such as was done in Africa and elsewhere. That was expressly forbidden by the Eighth Commandment.

The second significant meaning of the commandment against stealing is the sanctity of people’s property. Just as we are forbidden to steal people, we are forbidden to steal what people own. It has been shown over and over that private property, beginning with land ownership, is indispensable to creating a free and decent society. Every totalitarian regime takes away private property rights. In the ancient and medieval world a few rich people owned all the land and the majority of the population worked on that land for the enrichment of the owners. And then, in nineteenth century Europe, many socialists argued for taking away private property and giving it to the “people.” Where that advice was followed, in what came to be known as the communist world, theft of property quickly resulted in theft of freedom, and ultimately massive theft of life.

The third enormously important meaning of the commandment against stealing concerns the many non-material things each person owns: their reputation; their dignity; their trust; and their intellectual property. Let's quickly run through these:

1) A person's reputation. Stealing a person's good name -- whether through libel, slander, or gossip - is a particularly destructive form of theft. Because, unlike money or property, once a person's good name has been stolen, it can almost never be fully restored.

2) A person's dignity. The act of stealing a person's dignity is known as humiliation. And humiliating a person, especially in public, can do permanent damage to what is perhaps the most precious thing any of us owns -- our dignity.

3) A person's trust. Stealing a person's trust is known as deceiving someone. In fact, in Hebrew a term for tricking someone is *g'neivat da'at*, which literally means "stealing knowledge." One example is tricking people into buying something, as when a real estate agent omits telling a prospective purchaser all the flaws in a home, in order to make a sale. Another example would be when someone deceives another person with insincere proclamations of love in order to obtain material or sexual favors.

4) A person's intellectual property. This form of theft includes anything from copying software or downloading music and movies without paying for them to stealing a person's words, what we know as plagiarism.

5) Stealing a life, a person, a spouse, material property, intellectual property, a reputation, dignity, or trust: There is hardly any aspect of human life that is not harmed -- sometimes irreparably so -- by stealing. That is why it is fair to say that if everyone observed only one of the 10 commandments, observing the commandment "Do Not Steal" would, all by itself, make a beautiful world.

I'm Dennis Prager.