

The 8th Commandment: Possessions

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[0 : 0 0] enter stranger but take heed of what awaits the sin of greed for those who take but do not earn must pay most dearly in their turn so if you seek beneath our floors a treasure that was never yours thief you have been warned beware of finding more than treasure there anyone know where that's from you saw a preview jonathan that's cheating yes that's from harry potter and the philosopher's stone it's a warning on the uh when as you enter gringotts bank the wizard bank and i quite like it because it illustrates quite well the truth that where there is money or indeed anything of value there will indeed be thieves where there is something to be stolen there will always be someone considering stealing it we know this because theft is so commonplace if you've been living in glasgow for some time and you've not had your bike stolen you're doing pretty well if you have a phone and you haven't had some dodgy text or weird phone call trying to get you to hand over the keys to your assets well you're doing especially well we live in an age where like most ages that have gone before those with the most power and money can often be the most flagrant with their theft whether it be offshore tax havens wherever they might be for the big corporations or the abuse of expenses by some people in parliament we haven't even mentioned the more classic crimes of shoplifting or burglary at every level of society the temptation to steal is very very real and a lot of people do it we're on to the eighth commandment and this commandment strikes right at the heart of this social problem that really hits every society and god says you shall not steal the problem as the poem from harry potter alludes to is greed and it exists in our hearts as well as in the hearts and actions of those who have actually stolen in really obvious ways so we've got three points as we work through the meaning and implication of this commandment what the bible teaches us about how to relate rightly to our possessions one god gives all things two man craves all things and then a sort of positive implication and application of the commandment be generous in all things so one god gives all things this is a commandment about possessions about things the word for steal and the commandment can relate to basically anything that you might take unlawfully from its rightful owner it can even refer to people actually when joseph was sold into slavery in the book of genesis he recounts his story and says he was stolen out of the land of the hebrews it's the same word so this command covers the theft or capture of any of god's gifts from their rightful place whether it be material possessions money or people as we start to navigate our way through this command this is the key thing which we want to start with everything we have comes from god everything we have comes from god money possessions children whatever it might be all our gifts are given to us from our father in heaven and this has been true since the very beginning since god said let there be light and there was light god brought everything into being at the beginning god planted a garden called eden where the first humans adam and eve were given free reign to eat from whatever plant was there all things had been given to them for their enjoyment and god had provided the wealth of nature for their their sustenance and for their pleasure only one tree was forbidden of course the tree of the knowledge of good and evil even though they ended up eating from that forbidden tree bringing sin and death into the world god never stopped providing for them god did cast adam and eve out of eden but we're also told this

the lord god made garments of skin for adam and his wife and clothed them so even after the fall god is a god who provides and this who continues right to where we are today god is the one who ultimately gives all things he is the creator and he is the sustainer not all things are distributed equally since the fall but all things do come from god above jesus made this point very clearly when he said to his disciples and this was our our reading therefore i tell you do not worry about your life what you will eat or about your body what you will wear for life is more than food and the body more than clothes consider the ravens they do not sow or reap they have no storeroom or barn yet god feeds them and how much more valuable are you than birds jesus was making the point that god

continues to provide and if he ensures that the ravens are going to have enough food well how much more can we trust him to provide for his sons and for his daughters there there may be times in life where the bank balance looks rather precarious where there's unforeseen expenses just cropping up left right and center there are going to be times where we can't find work or times where the work we have is not quite enough to make ends meet the people that Jesus was talking to were facing just these sorts of problems and pressures these were people who if the harvest was poor well they were going to really struggle once the cold season started these were people who had to submit to the painfully steep Roman taxes these were people who relied on a good catch of fish in order to keep their family afloat who for many of them life was really rather precarious and we know how Jesus spoke to those who were in even dire straits the widows the beggars the lepers but considering this audience Jesus wasn't he wasn't being glib when he said that we shouldn't worry about life and what we're going to eat or drink do not worry about it for the pagan world runs after all such things and your father knows that you need them but seek his kingdom and these things will be given to you as well all things come from God and God provides for his people and man's response is to seek God's kingdom and to steward well that which God has given Jesus illustrates this in a number of his parables we'll just take one he told one about a man who was going on a journey and he entrusted his wealth to three of his servants two of the servants used the money they'd been entrusted with rather wisely they managed to make a profit from that money but one of the servants well he hid the money in the ground and he did nothing with it so when the master returned he raged at the lazy servant because he did nothing with what he had been given the point of the parable being God entrusts things to us and what we have ultimately belongs to him he is the man who went on the journey we are the servants to some has been entrusted much to some less but all of us no matter what we have been given and we have all been given something well we all have a duty to steward it wisely as Peter wrote in his first letter each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms so we're to steward what we have received in a way that honors God that is to use it for God and for his kingdom to obsess over possessions and money well that's to steward poorly to recognize that what we have is a gift and still belongs ultimately to the giver well that's going to lead to wise stewardship in the way that God originally intended the danger of course is in not trusting God's provision and this is going to be a temptation for most of us no matter where we sit on the economic ladder after all JD Rockefeller who at the time he said this was the richest man in the world we was once asked how much money is enough and his response was just a little bit more so it doesn't matter how much you have it's never quite enough and at the root of this is a failure to recognize that all comes from God a failure to trust that God will give you all you need the root of greed is that tiny voice in our heads that says if only I had this then I'd be able to relax the voice that says what's up to me to make sure we have enough for the month that voice that says you just need a little bit more to make sure that we're secure and happy and it's such an easy temptation isn't it but if God gives all things and man is to steward those things then man must trust God that he will give enough but of course man frequently doesn't instead of being wise stewards we more often than not crave those things which we don't have and that's our second point man craves all things we've already mentioned a few common ways in which people steal let me mention a few more just to further set the stage of the problem really because whilst I doubt that many of us are shoplifters or cheating on our tax returns at least I hope we're not there are other ways in which we break this command and give into greed an employee for example can steal time and money for example when they don't put the effort in or regularly clock off early or simply aim to run out the clock with that no care for working diligently or take an employer on the other hand an employer can steal from their employees by pressuring them to work much more than their contracted hours or by abusing the use of zero hour contracts to take two examples we steal when we turn a blind eye to the needs of others particularly those in our neighborhood and those who we know about those who are struggling we steal when we are stingy and reluctant to share what God has given us with those who God has placed around us we steal from God whenever we make an idol of anything because we're stealing from God by placing something or someone above him and worshiping it in his place I would even break this commandment when we are worried and anxious about our money because we're not trusting in the provision of our father when we say the Lord's prayer it can be very easy for the line give us today our daily bread to trip off the tongue without considering that what we're really

asking god is to provide for all that we need it's designed to be a prayer of confidence in god's provision and given what we've already said about man's responsibility to steward well what god has given well whenever we fail to do that whenever we hold back what god has given from others and don't try to use what god has given for his glory while we steal which means that martin luther was right to say that if we look at mankind in all its conditions it is nothing but a vast and wide stable full of thieves why does greed turn us all into thieves to greater or lesser degrees we've established that a failure to trust in god's provision lies at the root but i think there are also other influences as well that

stoke up greed in the the fire of our hearts a major influence of course is the culture around us it may be the amount of clothes we can buy cheaply with the rise of fast fashion it might be technology which brings out new models of things especially phones just to keep us craving the latest updates or it might be that craving for experiences to visit certain places and do certain things to to to complete the bucket list the culture is oriented around selling us products and selling us experiences and driving us to salivate over whatever is an offer and it relies on tapping into our greed and our want to have more than we already have which at the end of the day isn't hugely different from what the serpent managed in the garden we've already said that adam and eve had all that they could ever want only one single thing was forbidden them and the serpent used that single thing to make them want more and crave the one thing they didn't have and give in to greed genesis says when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom she took some and ate it she also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate it and this points us towards a deeper problem our culture merely exacerbates it but it's only building upon a pre-existing idol when paul writes to the colossians he lists a number of sins that they ought to put to death and he ends the list with greed and he compares it to idolatry he makes a similar point in his letter to the ephesians where he says that a greedy person is an idolater you're in the garden that was where this idol was first crafted and it's an idol precisely because it makes a god out of that which we do not have it's in this sense that i guess the eighth commandment is very close links to the tenth commandment do not envy and greed greed plays upon pleasure it's the pleasure of getting something for nothing you all of us love the idea of getting something without having to work for isn't that why we love a deal that says buy one get one free isn't that why gambling is so popular and so destructive but our desire for getting things for which we haven't worked for can take our hearts into incredibly unhelpful places it's this kind of thinking that the figure of lady folly plays upon as she invites unsuspecting people into our feast proverb says to those who have no sense she says stolen water is sweet food eaten in secret is delicious but little do they know that the dead are there that our guests keep that our guests are deep in the realm of the dead what i'm not saying i'm not saying that getting stuff for free is a bad thing nor am i saying that finding the best deals in tesco is sinful either but it is that desire for getting things without working for it that can really take us into places and tempt us in ways that are really unhelpful there's something about the transgression in those words from proverbs that provides a perverse pleasure stolen water is sweet food eaten in secret is delicious after all a bit of stealing doesn't hurt anyone it's hardly murder or adultery says lady folly in proverbs and that's as solomon in his proverbs is how sin tempts you and so it's imperative that we notice our own predisposition towards greed because we all have it somewhere in our hearts and greed is one of those sins which can so easily flow beneath the radar you know that's why lady folly chooses to lure her victims in with it and it lures them to the realm of the dead instead of listening to lady folly god gives us or paul gives us some better wisdom for how to consider that which we have and that which we do not listen to what he wrote to timothy his young

protege godliness with contentment is great gain for we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it but if we have food and clothing we will be content with that those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil some people eager for money have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs so paul knows all too well that greed is a terrible trap it greets like a treasure map it promises an awful lot but as you follow that map towards the point where x marks the spot you don't stop before it's too late you'll find yourself caught up in a trap you may find the treasure but you'll find something much worse as well and that worse thing says paul tends to be a wandering away from the faith greed says paul brings destruction ruin and grief x only marks the spot of the greedy person's downfall and this is why jesus said this about treasure and where we ought to find it do not be afraid little flock for your

father has been pleased to give you the kingdom sell your possessions and give to the poor provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out a treasure in heaven that will never fail where no thief comes near and no moth destroys for where your treasure is there your heart will be also and jesus words prompt a question where is your treasure in heaven and eternity or here where it rusts and decays if our treasure is in heaven and if our desire is for christ and for his kingdom then we will be able to live out the positive implications of this commandment and be generous in all things and this is our last point this begins with working hard paul writes the colossians whatever you do work at it with all your heart as working for the lord not for human masters since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the lord as a reward it is the lord christ you are serving so if our treasure is in heaven then this is the way we will go about our lives working hard not for our own gain and greed but for christ in the knowledge that we will receive an internal inheritance from him paul also says in ephesians 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 so we're to work hard for christ and also so that we can share with others and cultivate generosity in matthew's gospel i think surely no accident that immediately after jesus is told that parable of the master who goes away on a journey and gives the money to the three servants to use well jesus then talks about the people that he is going to welcome when he comes in glory and they are those who were selfless with what god had given them they are those who shared their food with the hungry their drink with the thirsty and visited their brothers and sisters in prison or when they were sick they are those who gave rather than those who took when jesus returns he says that he's going to say to these people truly i tell you whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine you did for me so to be like the servants who use what their master gave them wisely is to be like the one who looks after his brothers and sisters with generosity and with compassion

[20 : 24] and this is what characterized the early church acts tells us all the believers were one in heart and mind no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own but they shared everything they had god's grace was so powerfully at work in them that there were no needy persons among them so generosity begins in the church the family of god but i think that principle extends even further and is a powerful witness to the change that jesus brings and his grace you know no longer are we greedy and selfish when we're united to christ but we are generous and selfless and sometimes this is going to take practice you know most of us will struggle to varying degrees with selflessness and generosity and some of that struggle is going to be rooted out of our fear that we don't have enough to give but we can learn to be a cheerful giver by doing let me consider two examples that we have in luke's gospel one was very poor a widow luke writes as jesus looked up he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury he also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins truly i tell you he said this poor widow has put in more than all the others despite her poverty she gave to god in trust that he would provide and you can hear christ's commendation of her he loves her he loves her for her devotion to her treasures in heaven and to god and the other example is very rich a tax collector zacchaeus abused his position to steal for himself but when jesus came into his life his attitude completely changed in the blink of an eye luke tells us but zacchaeus stood up and said to the lord look lord here and now i give half of my possessions to the poor and if i've cheated anybody out of anything i will pay back four times the amount of the poor and jesus said to him today salvation has come into this house because this man too is a son of abraham for the son of man came to seek and to save the lost the lost man zacchaeus was found and he was changed the gospel of grace transformed and no longer was he selfish and greedy for money and for wealth but now he knew that he had a greater treasure he could freely give back what was stolen and give back even more and this is the point i want us to end on as we close the son of man came to seek and to save the lost in our culture that idolizes everything that money can buy well there's something that money can't in our hearts which love the thought of getting something for nothing well there's one thing that people can get for nothing but rarely think of but this thing they desperately need i'm of course talking about god's gift of salvation and grace of all the things that god gives this is the greatest and as jesus died on the cross to give it with a thief on his right and a thief on his left well one thief died with his heart set on eternity and the inheritance jesus gives all who believe luke records first the exchange then he the thief said jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom and jesus answered him truly i tell you today you will be with me in paradise and so a question to finish with is your heart on treasures here which rust and decay and die or on christ grace and paradise

which will last for all of time you