

Deuteronomy 5:19

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The LORD commands His people not to steal.

The Eighth Commandment

The act of taking someone's property known as "stealing" was widespread in the ancient Near Eastern civilizations. Such an act included seizing someone's property and selling it for a personal profit, using inaccurate weights and balances in the marketplace, and even taking possession of a human life (kidnapping). In most of the ancient civilizations, the penalty for theft was often a fine which could be as high as thirty times the value of the materials stolen. However, in Babylon and Assyria, some cases of property crimes were punished by death. The LORD issued His prohibition to His people. He said, "*You shall not steal.*"

In the Hebrew language, the verb "to steal" (gānab) generally refers to the secret act of taking someone's goods and possessions without the owner's knowledge ([Genesis 31:30](#); [Leviticus 19:11](#)). It has to do primarily with taking someone's property. The Suzerain (Ruler) God wanted His vassals to be content and satisfied with what He has given them. So, He commanded them not to steal someone's belongings.

In contrast to some ancient Near Eastern civilizations, the Old Testament did not apply the death penalty for theft. The thief was required to pay restitution, often being required to return double the amount he had stolen ([Exodus 22:1-15](#)). God's judicial system was designed to restore and cultivate a self-governing community, rather than to enforce the authority of a ruling power. Causing the thief to restore to the victim what he stolen had the effect of requiring each citizen to take personal responsibility for their actions, while focusing the punishment upon restoring the injury done to the victim.

The act of kidnapping was an exception. This act of theft required death since it involves seizing a human life ([Exodus 21:16](#)). This is still consistent with the restorative principle. A person who takes property can learn responsibility and restore fellowship in the community through restitution. But someone willing to kidnap or murder is beyond restoration, and must be removed from society, lest the harmony of the self-governing community be disrupted sufficiently to

make harmonious self-governance unworkable, and the earth again fill with violence.

The prohibition on stealing is an integral part of the last five commands, which Jesus summed up as the second great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself ([Mark 12:31](#)). It would be impossible to treat someone else with the same respect we give ourselves while stripping them of their property. The rule of law is one of three pillars of self-governance. Within the Ten Commandments is the core of another pillar of self-governance: private property. Private property is an extension of the dignity and personal sovereignty of each human. Not only do people deserve the respect of not being personally injured, they also deserve the respect of having possession of their property respected. The great mutual benefit of a self-governing society was to be an example to other nations. God is setting up a priestly society to serve as an example. And treating other with respect includes treating their possessions with respect.

The New Testament also regards the act of stealing as a serious offense. Jesus himself repeats the commandment when someone asked him what to do to obtain eternal life ([Matthew 19:16-18](#)). According to the apostle Paul, no thief will “inherit the kingdom of God” ([1 Corinthians 6:9](#)). In each case these verses refer to the experiential enjoyment and reward of the gift of eternal life, similar to Israel’s opportunity to enjoy possession of the land God had unconditionally granted.

To inherit the rewards of the kingdom of God, “He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need” ([Ephesians 4:28](#)). Believers today should do their best to avoid stealing of any form in order to please God. When we do all we do with complete honesty, we are following this biblical pattern of living in a constructive manner that builds harmonious self-governing society, and thereby serving a priestly function.

Biblical Text:

¹⁹ **You shall not steal.**