

Exodus 20:15

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/exod/exod-20/exodus-2015/>

The eighth commandment protects the private property of each person.

The eighth command is succinct, *you shall not steal*. The word for *steal* (Heb. “ganab”) is used in the Mosaic Law to refer to taking something that belongs to another without purchase or consent. It includes burglary (Exodus 22:2) and kidnapping, the “stealing” of another person (Exodus 21:16). Later, the punishment for stealing was specified, where the thief was to return twice the amount of what was stolen (Exodus 22:7). If kidnapping was involved, the kidnapper was to be executed (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7).

This commandment assumed that a person has the right to his or her private possessions. This command was given to bestow upon each person the responsibility to protect the property of their neighbors, just as they desired their own property to be protected. This is another pillar of a self-governing society. There was no executive branch in Israel. Each person had custody of their own property. In order for the society to provide ongoing mutual benefit, each person had to respect the property of their neighbor. Taking the sixth through eighth commandments together, each person and family was to be respected and cared for by the other persons and families.

Much of the violence recorded in human history has its root in one person seeking to take the property of another. Perhaps it is their produce, or their land from which the produce is gained. In either case, the means of extraction is violence. In a self-governing society where each person respects and protects the property of the other members of the community, the energy that would otherwise be channeled into violence is instead available to create mutual benefit. Much of the promised blessing is implied within the commands themselves. Any community filled with people who choose the self-restraint required to treat their neighbors in this self-governing manner will be an immensely productive society that creates a very pleasurable environment in which to dwell.

Biblical Text:

¹⁵ “You shall not steal.