

TEACHING CHILDREN THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

“Thou shalt not steal.”

While the Eighth Commandment seems very direct and clear – “Thou shalt not steal” – the definition of stealing appears to be a rather murky one for some. Young people who would be shocked at hearing that an acquaintance robbed a bank, or took money from a friend’s wallet, may see no problem with shoplifting from a store, cheating on an important test (because everyone else is doing it), or manipulating someone into destructive behavior, such as drinking or drugs, that goes against their better instincts.

This is one commandment that depends a great deal upon the example set for children by their family members or adults they observe on a regular basis. If a parent uses manipulation to get what he or she wants from a spouse, or a sibling bullies and uses other violent tactics to successfully intimidate others, then a young child may grow up to use these same methods.

You may be wondering what that kind of behavior has to do with “stealing.” If you have come directly to this page, you might wish to read the full essay on the [Eighth Commandment](#) for background. Each of the [Ten Commandments](#) addresses more than the literal, obvious meaning, and the Eighth Commandment is no different. If we think of stealing as merely the attempt to rob another of some thing, it is time to take a deeper look at its meaning, if you wish to live the spirit of this rule of God.

Most children are taught not to steal, as one of their very early lessons. This usually consists in learning that it is wrong to take things that do not belong to you without permission. And if this lesson takes hold, that is a major victory! But as they mature, children could benefit from learning what other actions might be considered stealing, so they can protect themselves and others from breaking the spirit of the Eighth Commandment.

In addition to some of the points made in the essay on this Commandment, here are a few ideas suitable for discussion with individual children or Sunday School classes.

FOR LITTLE KIDS

1. Simply ask your young pupils if it is right to take a toy from someone without permission. They will probably repeat what their parents have taught them. Ask them why it would be wrong. If they do not understand, do some role-playing. Give them the words to use to ask to use or borrow something belonging to a classmate or sibling. Then, ask them how they would feel if someone took something special that belonged to them and refused to return it, and so on. Remind them of the [Golden Rule](#), if they have already learned about it.

2. Explain to them that God has a big rule: “*Thou shalt not steal.*” It is found in Exodus 20 and is one of the Ten Commandments. Ask if they might know why this would be an important rule.
3. Explain difference between stealing on purpose and accidentally taking something thoughtlessly. Remind them that if they get permission from the rightful owner first, then that is not stealing.
4. Discuss ways that young children often try to get things that they want: by nagging, or sweet talking insincerely, bullying, trickery, or taking something secretly and hoping no one will notice. All of these actions are unloving, and break the Eighth Commandment.
5. Turn their thought to the positive side of this Commandment – to WHY we do not need to steal. Show them Genesis 1:31 in the Bible: “*And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.*” God has only good planned for each of His children and no one is left out. We may have different things and different opportunities come our way. We can turn to God in prayer if we have a need, and learn to trust Him with our lives.

FOR OLDER KIDS

There are certain situations that may be of greater temptation for those entering their teen years that should be discussed. For example:

Shoplifting and “borrowing” clothes: While most kids get that shoplifting is wrong, there is a feeling that taking items from a store or company without paying does no harm to individuals, and therefore is not so bad. But they need to understand how this ends up costing them and consumers more money because of the losses to the store and the costs of insurance, which are passed along to shoppers. Therefore, it is stealing from the wallets of innocent, hard-working people. Also, there is a habit, not just with teens, of buying fancy clothes (often Prom or Homecoming dresses), wearing them once for the big occasion, and then returning them to the store. Explain that this, too, is stealing, because the dress then becomes “used,” and everyone loses money on it. Bring in the **Golden Rule**. Perhaps one day they will be shop owners, and would they want others stealing from them in this way? These store losses can affect the profits which are needed to raise families, and so on. The honest thing to do is to buy only what you can afford, and take responsibility for what is purchased, returning only what is truly defective. Explain that shoplifting is not a harmless game. It can land them in jail.

Cheating on Tests: Yes, this is stealing. By cheating on tests, students steal from others, their teachers, their school, and themselves. They deprive everyone of an honest assessment of whether or not the subject has been successfully taught and

successfully learned. In some situations, students can be robbed of their rightful spot near the top of the class, by others who have cheated. Competition for college admissions does create a lot of stress for high school students, and there is a great temptation for them to do whatever is necessary to make good grades, but if they do not earn those high grades through honest methods, then they have certainly broken the Eighth Commandment. There are spiritual consequences to this that may not concern them now, but for those who love God and want see the benefits of obeying Him, there is a sense of peace for those who have honestly earned their grades.

Addictive behavior: Indulging in destructive habits such as smoking, drinking, drugs, overeating is a form of stealing. These appetites can rob both mind and body of good health and proper development – spiritually and physically. Though Christian Science teaches that matter is only a false concept of the substance of Spirit, as long as we are human we do need to respect our bodies by taking common-sense care of them. Why give the poor body more than it can handle naturally? It breaks the Eighth Commandment when we steal this good health from ourselves, or encourage our friends to indulge with us.

Stealing friends: At a certain age, young people get very possessive about their friends. There can be a lot of manipulation among groups of friends to get best buddies or to exclude others from the clique. While friends cannot really be stolen, in the usual sense of that word, attempts to alienate the affections of one friend for another could be considered a form of stealing. True friendship and love is not personally possessive, and inspires confidence that friends can congregate and relate naturally, with no need to control others. Learning this discipline while young can prevent much heartache when romantic companionships become the coveted prize.

Stealing good reputations: It is also a form of stealing when one attempts to rob others of their good reputation by spreading gossip and falsehoods for whatever reason. This kind of character assassination is strongly rebuked in the Bible. And young people should know that in the adult world, slander is against the law, and there are serious consequences for spreading falsehoods about another. As always, the **Golden Rule** should be considered when tempted to control others through gossip or intimidation. This will be discussed again under the Ninth Commandment: “*Thou shalt not bear false witness.*” But malicious gossip can also be seen as a form of stealing.

Those are just a few of the areas of possible discussion with your kids or Sunday School class. When other Commandments are broken, there may not be a social consequence. But many forms of stealing are against the law, and young people need to develop the discipline and instincts that will protect them from making destructive choices in the face of temptation.

For teachers who wish to explore the history of the Eighth Commandment and how it was lived in Biblical times, here is some useful background material:

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

A study of this theme in the Old Testament shows that the Eighth Commandment, *"Thou shalt not steal,"* is not simply about property rights, or about those who "have not" trying to take from those who "have," but is also about greed, ingratitude, and a fear of lack versus satisfaction, gratitude, and a trust in God's care for all.

To emphasize the importance of this Commandment, it is repeated a number of times and a number of ways throughout the Old Testament (KJV). We are told:

"And the Lord spake unto Moses saying: . . . Ye shall not steal, neither deal falsely, neither lie one to another." (Leviticus 19:1, 11)

"Neither shalt thou steal." (Deuteronomy 5:19)

"Then said he [an angel] unto me, This is the curse that goeth forth over the face of the whole earth: for every one that stealeth shall be cut off as on this side according to it." (Zechariah 5:3)

"And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying . . . The people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy: yea, they have oppressed the stranger wrongfully. . . . Therefore have I poured out mine indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath: their own way have I recompensed upon their heads, saith the Lord God." (Ezekiel 22:23, 29, 31)

The Bible makes clear that stealing is a sin which will bring punishment. And yet, it is a sin which comes with a very clear path to **redemption**, as outlined in the Old Testament. The Bible scholar William Barclay writes:

"The law of the Old Testament does not simply condemn stealing; it has much to say about the penalty for it. The law of the Old Testament never fails to insist that restitution has to be made; in fact, the restitution is usually the punishment. One of the notable features of the Old Testament law is that it is just as eager to see that the victim is compensated as that the criminal is punished." (Barclay, William: "The Ten Commandments," Westminster John Knox Press, 1998 edition, pg. 162)

This is illustrated in the book of Exodus 22:1-12, in which Moses outlines in detail the punishments and compensations for stealing. Part of it reads:

"If a man shall steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it; he shall restore five oxen

for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. . . . If a man shall deliver unto his neighbour money or stuff to keep, and it be stolen out of the man's house; if the thief be found, let him pay double."

We also learn that there is a very harsh penalty for stealing a man in order to sell him into slavery:

"And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death." (Exodus 21:16)

"If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth him; then that thief shall die; and thou shalt put evil away from among you." (Deuteronomy 24:7)

What is also interesting in the Old Testament is the nature of certain crimes considered stealing. Both *usury* – the lending of money at interest – and manipulating weights and measures, were severely condemned. God is shown as caring for the poor and needy and demanding that those in a position to help should do so without exacting too much in return:

"If thou lend money to any of my people that is poor by thee, thou shalt not be to him as an usurer, neither shalt thou lay upon him usury. If thou at all take thy neighbour's raiment to pledge, thou shalt deliver it unto him by that the sun goeth down: For that is his covering only, it is his raiment for his skin: wherein shall he sleep? and it shall come to pass, when he crieth unto me, that I will hear; for I am gracious." (Exodus 22:25-27)

"And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him: yea, though he be a stranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee. Take thou no usury of him, or increase: but fear thy God; that thy brother may live with thee. Thou shalt not give him thy money upon usury, nor lend him thy victuals for increase." (Leviticus 25:35-37)

William Barclay has some interesting comments on usury that show a principle beneath the commandment:

"Is this a total prohibition of lending money at interest? The real principle of this goes much deeper than that. It is not simply a prohibition of lending at interest; it is the commandment of God that no man must ever take advantage of his brother's misfortune. No man must, to put it in modern language, cash in on his brother's need. There are times when it is possible to drive a hard bargain, or to charge a high price, simply because someone desperately needs something. The law of the Bible is that no one must ever take advantage of another's need, and use that need for his own profit and enrichment." (The Ten Commandments, pg. 170)

The Old Testament has at least five instances of condemning stealing by the use of false scales and measurements, such as the verses below:

"Thou shalt not have in thy bag divers weights, a great and a small. Thou shalt not have in thine house divers measures, a great and a small. But thou shalt have a perfect and just weight, a perfect and just measure shalt thou have: that thy days may be lengthened in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee. For all that do such things, and all that do unrighteously, are an abomination unto the Lord thy God." (Deuteronomy 25:13-16)

"A false balance is abomination to the Lord: but a just weight is his delight." (Proverbs 11:1)

"Divers weights are an abomination unto the Lord; and a false balance is not good." (Proverbs 20:23)

We start to get the point that even in the smallest of details we must be honest and forthright. Taking advantage of others is a form of stealing that is an "abomination" to God. Barclay comments further:

"It may seem a quite extraordinary thing that the Bible should take up so much space to speak about weights and measures, and the accuracy of scales and containers and units of measurement. It is intensely significant that the assumption is that God is interested in these things, and that careful justice and meticulous honesty in these things is the natural and essential expression of true religion."

"The Bible lays it down that there is something badly wrong with the religion of the man who will worship on the Sunday and who will then go out to be a careless or a dishonest tradesman, robbing others by offering less than his best, or a man in any kind of business indulging in smart practice to make a quick profit, or a clever opportunist using someone's need as a chance to make more for himself, or an employer who is blind and unsympathetic to his employees' needs." (The Ten Commandments, pg. 171)

It is not enough to avoid stealing from our fellow man; we must see to it that we do not steal from God. According to the Old Testament, God seemed to take notice when tithes were withheld or shortchanged (a tithe being one-tenth of one's goods or earnings):

"Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the

Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it." (Malachi 3:8-10)

We now move into the New Testament to see how Christ Jesus taught and demonstrated the Commandment, *"Thou shalt not steal."*

JESUS AND THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

After Jesus was baptized by John, he was led into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. The very first temptation that Jesus had to face down was using his Christ-power to create a comfortable material life. We read:

"And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:3-4)

This is a temptation that faces every spiritual seeker at some point. How shall we use our developing spiritual sense, understanding, and power? Shall we use them in turning stones into bread, so to speak – using prayer mainly for personal material gain and satisfaction – or do we seek Truth for Truth's sake, feeding upon the Word of God which nourishes our spiritual identity, something matter alone could never do.

While the New Testament does not indicate that Jesus spoke much about the Eighth Commandment, it does show us that he strived to teach us about the evils of greed, ingratitude, and lust – all qualities that could lead to stealing. Jesus urges us to turn to God, and trust Him for our needs. Some of his miracles directly relate to this law of abundance: he turned water into wine; he fed thousands with just a few loaves and fishes; he paid taxes with a coin found in a fish's mouth.

Jesus taught that if we put God first in our lives, we would have no desire to steal, and we would also not set ourselves up to be victims of those who would steal:

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:19-21)

We also get an idea of how strongly Jesus felt about keeping our consciousness – which is our true spiritual temple or church – free from those sins which would attempt

to rob God and invade His rightful territory, in this episode at the temple in Jerusalem:

"And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves." (Matthew 21:12-13))

We may think we do all the right things – perhaps we have never stolen anything, or shoplifted, or cheated on taxes – but Jesus tells us that stealing is an evil thought, which would defile us if left unchallenged in our conscience, whether we act upon it or not. Evil thoughts must be condemned before they take root in thought and spring into action. Jesus once explained:

*"For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, **THEFTS**, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man."* (Matthew 15:19-20)

Jesus taught that we must be grateful to God no matter how little we may seem to have. In Luke we see that Jesus taught that our motive means more than money:

"And he looked up, and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites. And he said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all: For all these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God: but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had." (Luke 21:1-4)

Not long after Jesus completed his earthly mission, the Apostle Paul would write to the Christians at Ephesus: *"Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth."* (Ephesians 4:28)

As the above citation indicates, God's goodness can come to us through what appear as normal human avenues. We may be given opportunities to earn money to buy what we need, or we may be able to barter for goods or services in exchange for what we can offer. Sometimes our needs may be met by inheritances or gifts from others, and maybe, just when our prospects seem bleak and all doors of opportunity seem shut to us, we just might find what we need in a fish's mouth!

What about those in extreme poverty, who might be tempted to steal just to meet basic needs? It would be hard to blame them, wouldn't it? And, certainly, we want to

have mercy on such brothers and sisters who have found themselves in dire circumstances, and help them in any way we can to improve their lives. But stealing is rarely justified, if ever, and would prevent us from seeing the opportunities God provides His children through infinite avenues, even if it is the temporary willingness to accept charity, when necessary. Our real need is for trust in God, divine Love.

There is always a better way than stealing for getting to where we need to be – whether that need is having food, housing, or a sense of the kingdom of heaven on earth. As we read earlier, Jesus instructed us how to begin this better way when he said:

"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself." (Matthew 6:33-34)

TEACHING THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT TO CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PUPILS

For those parents or Sunday School teachers interested in lessons on the Eighth Commandment based upon the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, the Discoverer and Founder of Christian Science, you can check out the Questions and Answers below from my book *First Lessons in Christian Science, Volume One: The Ten Commandments*. These lessons can be read aloud or the teacher can use the ideas and citations offered to customize a lesson geared toward a particular age or interest. You might want to also read the introductory material in the book and background information helpful in teaching the Ten Commandments, [found here](#). Many adults who are new to Christian Science have enjoyed reading these lessons for their simple explanations.

[The Eighth Commandment - For Young Children](#)

[What is 'stealing'?](#)

[Is it possible for us, in belief, to steal from God, or from ourselves?](#)

[What else can be stolen from people besides material things?](#)

[Has God made man capable of stealing, of being a thief, or a robber?](#)

[What does our spiritual individuality possess that cannot be stolen?](#)

[How do cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs steal from us?](#)