

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, PART 3

### EXODUS 20:14-15

The seventh commandment involves marital relations. In terms of the biblical record, this isn't a simple issue; it's complicated. Men seemed to get a pass on this sin more so than women. In the Old Testament, having concubines seemed to be acceptable and polygamy was practiced. God certainly prohibited these things, but He tolerated them in Old Testament times for reasons known only to Him. I don't believe these practices were widespread throughout Israelite society because only wealthy men could afford to support numerous women and children, but it apparently was acceptable at the time and not a breach of societal decorum. If you could afford it, you could do it.

There apparently was a custom at the time that allowed a man with a barren wife to use a servant girl to bear a child for that wife. That was the situation with Sarah and Hagar who gave birth to Abraham's son Ishmael (Gen. 16:1-4). We are still living with the consequences of that decision given the state of the world concerning Islam. Samuel's father, Elkanah, had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah (1 Sam. 1:2). Saul had at least one wife, Ahinoam (1 Sam. 14:50) and one concubine, Rizpah (2 Sam. 3:7). David had at least eight wives and he had concubines as well (2 Sam. 5:13). Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3). Gideon had "many wives" and a concubine (Judges 8:30-31). There was a Levite who had a concubine who was murdered at Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin (Judges 19-20). What is interest-

ing about this is the Bible twice referred to him as her husband (Judges 19:3, 20:4), to her father as his father-in-law (Judges 19:4), and to the Levite himself as the son-in-law. This illustrates the fact that being a concubine nearly assumed the status of a wife and if we consider Jacob as an example, who had two wives and their two maids as concubines (Gen. 29-30), there doesn't seem to be any difference. Certainly, the sons of all four of Jacob's wives and concubines were all blessed to be the heads of the twelve tribes that established the nation of Israel. The point is, the concept of marital plurality in several forms was firmly entrenched in Ancient Near East and Jewish society at the time.

It is also disturbing to consider the warning God gave the kings through Moses not to multiply horses, wives, and gold and silver for themselves because those things would be a snare for the kings and for the nation. Of course, they did all of those things and they did, in fact, become a snare for them. At the same time, God told them to write a copy of the Law and continually read it, which, with the possible exception of David, none of them were faithful to do (Dt. 17:14-20). One could say the priorities of the Israelite kings was exactly backwards! They did everything they weren't supposed to do and they didn't do what they were supposed to do, and those things combined created serious problems for the nation. Solomon started his reign well but he ended it poorly because his pagan wives turned him aside to the abominations of Molech, Chemosh, Milcom, and Ashtoreth and who knows what other pagan deities he worshiped (1 Kings 11:1-13) because he wasn't content to have only one wife.

As I mentioned, it seems God tolerated this situation for His reasons. After David's sin with Bathsheba, the Lord told David through the prophet Nathan He gave him Saul's wives and if that wasn't enough, He would have given Him more.

2 Samuel 12:8      <sup>8</sup>I also gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if *that had been* too little, I would have added to you many more things like these!

Exodus 20:14      <sup>14</sup>"You shall not commit adultery [ἡδύ].

The word translated "adultery," ἡδύ, means to commit adultery, that is, to have a sexual relationship with a person other than one's spouse. This commandment certainly relates to interpersonal relationships between men and women, but it also has profound implications as a picture of mankind's relationship to God. This particular commandment refers only to adultery; it is a sin within the bounds of marriage which is the most intimate of relationships. Other sexual sins are dealt with in other parts of the Bible.

This commandment preserves the sanctity of the family which is the building block of society. I suspect that most people listening to me today have personally known families torn apart by adultery, if not experienced it. It is a sin that damages spouses and especially harms children; it certainly tears families apart. God considered this to be so evil, He allowed the death penalty for it although there is no record in the text revealing the imposition of the death penalty for adultery by means of stoning. It is a sin that may be committed by both men and women.

Deuteronomy 22:22–24 <sup>22</sup>“If a man is found lying with a married woman, then both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman; thus you shall purge the evil from Israel. <sup>23</sup>“If there is a girl who is a virgin engaged to a man, and *another* man finds her in the city and lies with her, <sup>24</sup>then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and you shall stone them to death; the girl, because she did not cry out in the city, and the man, because he has violated his neighbor’s wife. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you.

The gospel of John referred back to Deuteronomy for imposing death by stoning in cases of adultery.

John 8:5 <sup>5</sup>“Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?”

The concept of adultery so damages the family unit, that God designed a test to determine whether or not a wife had committed the offense (Num. 5:11-31). It is interesting to note there was no comparable test for men. If this test was to have any efficacy at all, it had to be work of the Holy Spirit. The guilty had to be identified without mistake and the innocent had to be positively identified to prevent a miscarriage of justice and these things could only be supernaturally determined. This wasn't magic, it was the work of God. Some theologians and secular rationalists believe a guilty woman when placed in this situation would, if guilty, exhibit the symptoms of guilt as the result of the influence of psychological guilt, but this entirely too subjective and it was too important a situation for that to be the determinative factor. Besides, that wouldn't work on people who were sociopaths because they have no mechanism for feeling guilt; they only care about themselves. My conclusion is, since this was commanded by God it would

be the work of God to determine guilt or innocence in the presence of the people.

The sin of adultery also represents the violation of covenant which is a serious matter. Man's relationship with God is pictured in Scripture in terms of man's relationship within the family unit. In the same way that man may commit adultery within his own family, man may commit spiritual adultery within the family of God. Pagans cannot commit spiritual adultery because they are not espoused to God; they are living a life of spiritual death separated from God. Israel was considered to be Yahweh's wife (Jer. 31:32) and the church is the bride of Christ. Spiritual adultery was the most egregious of sins Israel committed against God and they had their nation destroyed because of it.

Jeremiah 31:32 <sup>32</sup>not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

God established and defined marriage in the relationship between Adam and Eve.

Genesis 2:18, 21-25 <sup>18</sup>Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him."... <sup>21</sup>So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. <sup>22</sup>The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup>The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man." <sup>24</sup>For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. <sup>25</sup>And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

This relationship is so intimate that the marriage relationship is said to take two people and make them one. This is a picture of the intimacy we have as children in the family of God. It is a picture of the familial unit with all the closeness and intimacy that entails, not just between man and wife, but within the entire family unit which is held together by faithfulness to one another and to Him. Is it any wonder that God considers marital infidelity to be a picture of rebellion and infidelity in our relationship with Him? The book of Hosea is an in-depth examination of God's thoughts on Israel's infidelity and His condemnation of it.

Hosea 4:11–13 <sup>11</sup>Harlotry [זְנוּת], wine and new wine take away the understanding. <sup>12</sup>My people consult their wooden idol, and their *diviner's* wand informs them; For a spirit of harlotry [זְנוּתִים] has led *them* astray, And they have played the harlot [זָנְתָה], *departing* from their God. <sup>13</sup>They offer sacrifices on the tops of the mountains And burn incense on the hills, Under oak, poplar and terebinth, Because their shade is pleasant. Therefore your daughters play the harlot [זָנְתָה] And your brides commit adultery [נָאָרָה].

Harlotry, זְנוּת, in this context means unfaithfulness; it is the state of activity of not being faithful or believing in a deity as a figurative extension of illicit sexual activity. The “spirit of harlotry,” זְנוּתִים, is used figuratively to refer to idolatry; the “spirit of harlotry” refers to an illicit relationship with a pagan deity. The Israelites were cheating on God with pagan gods. A harlot, זָנְתָה, refers to one who acts as a prostitute and here it is used figuratively to mean unfaithfulness; it is to be unfaithful to a person or a principle resulting in unreliable behavior as a figurative extension of sexual promiscuity on the part of a spouse that is in a covenant relationship. All of this is then connected to adultery, נָאָרָה. It is easy to see how all

this applies in a spiritual sense concerning the marital relationship as it pictures the relationship to and with God.

Ephesians 5:22-33 describes the marriage unit as a type of the church in Christ. Paul referred to this as a mystery and made it clear he was referring to Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:32 <sup>32</sup>This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

In the same way that Israel committed spiritual adultery against Yahweh, the church can commit spiritual adultery against Him. James and John both addressed this aspect of adultery.

James 4:4 <sup>4</sup>You adulteresses [μοιχαλίσ], do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Revelation 2:22 <sup>22</sup>Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery [μοιχεύω] with her [Jezebel] into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.

The male/female double standard was operative among the Greeks and adultery, μοιχεύω, means sexual intercourse of a man with a married woman other than his spouse. A married man who had a relationship with an unmarried woman was not considered to have committed adultery but instead committed fornication, πορνεία. Unlike Greek men, married woman committed adultery any time they strayed from the marital relationship. The spiritual concept of adultery against God is no differently expressed between Greek and Hebrew. Adulterous, μοιχαλίσ, means to be unfaithful and adulterous. Figuratively, it pertains to being

unfaithful to one's earlier and true beliefs; it indicates one who is unfaithful toward God as an adulteress is unfaithful toward her husband.

The Lord made it clear that it was an adulterous generation of Jews that rejected Him. The meaning is clear. That generation of Jews had forsaken their covenantal vows with Yahweh and His Messiah and had attached themselves to something else which was the act of spiritual adultery.

Matthew 16:4      <sup>4</sup>"An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah." And He left them and went away.

Mark 8:38      <sup>38</sup>"For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

Before the giving of the Law, there is an indication that adultery was a matter of the heart before it ever became a matter of actual conduct and codified in the Mosaic Law. In other words, godly people didn't need the Law to tell them adultery was wrong. There is something built into the very fabric of what it means to be a man and a woman united in marriage that makes adultery unpalatable. Even single people in a relationship know it is wrong to cut out on one another. It is only by means of brainwashing children from birth that some societies seemingly embrace the concept of adultery, polygamy, and concubines. Some religious sects embrace polygamy and convince their women it is God's will for their community. Generally speaking, in this time at least, polygamy is the playground of deviant, perverted men. I suspect that if one probed deep enough, one would discover that at least the women would not



be all that accepting of it. Job indicates that adultery would have been a serious violation of community mores that would have resulted in his destruction in whatever fashion that would have taken at the time which was long before the Mosaic Law. The fact that adultery was known to be wrong was true 4,000 years ago and it is true now.

Job 31:1, 9-12      <sup>1</sup>"I have made a covenant with my eyes; How then could I gaze at a virgin? ... <sup>9</sup>"If my heart has been enticed by a woman, Or I have lurked at my neighbor's doorway, <sup>10</sup>May my wife grind for another, And let others kneel down over her. <sup>11</sup>"For that would be a lustful crime; Moreover, it would be an iniquity *punishable by judges*. <sup>12</sup>"For it would be fire that consumes to Abaddon [אַבְדוֹן], And would uproot all my increase.

Joseph called adultery a "great evil and sin against God."

Genesis 39:9"There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?"

Abaddon, אַבְדוֹן, means destruction; it pertains to the destroying or ruining of an object so as to be unusable, hence worthless. Job was saying that adultery invites destruction into one's life as the consequence for committing that sin. How much more then will destruction ensue in the life of one who commits spiritual adultery. Salvation will not, cannot, be lost, but there will certainly be consequences attached to forsaking the Lord for other gods and idolatrous pursuits.

Pre-Mosaic Law ancient societies also prohibited adultery. A researcher named W. L. Moran found in ancient Ugarit and Egyptian marriage contracts

references to a “great sin” which was identified as adultery.<sup>1</sup> This term was also used in the Bible to indicate adultery in terms of male/female relationships and in terms of spiritually forsaking Yahweh for idols.

Abimelech accused Abraham of causing him to commit a great sin by lying to him when the patriarch told him Sarah was his sister and Abimelech then took her into his harem. Notice, first of all that the sin of adultery is a sin against God and against man, and notice also the moral condemnation Abimelech attached to his rebuke of Abraham hundreds of years before the Mosaic Law.

Genesis 20:6, 9     <sup>6</sup>Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her. ... <sup>9</sup>Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, “What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.”

When the Israelites fashioned the golden calf at Mt. Sinai, Moses told them they had committed a great sin. In this context, the term “great sin” obviously addressed the aspect of spiritual adultery.

Exodus 32:21, 30-31     <sup>21</sup>Then Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you, that you have brought *such* great sin upon them?” ... <sup>30</sup>On the next day Moses said to the people, “You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now I am going up to the LORD, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” <sup>31</sup>Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, “Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves.

---

<sup>1</sup> W. L. Moran, “The Scandal of the ‘Great Sin’ at Ugarit” in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 18, no. 4 (Oct. 1959): 280, <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/jnes/1959/18/4>, accessed 1 Nov. 2017.

The final time this term was used in the Old Testament was in connection with Jeroboam and his program of idolatrous worship to keep his citizens in Israel and out of Judah to worship at the Temple. Again, the concept of adultery was used to refer to spiritual adultery between God and His people.

2 Kings 17:21      <sup>21</sup>When He had torn Israel from the house of David, they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king. Then Jeroboam drove Israel away from following the LORD and made them commit a great sin.

A series of writings called the Shurpu Text recorded a series of incantations written by men seeking relief from divine punishment inflicted upon them for committing various sins including adultery. One man “entered the house of his companion, (sexually) approached the wife of his companion” (II 47-48) and another went “in secret to his friend’s wife” (IV 6).<sup>2</sup> Apparently, bad things began happening to them and they attributed those circumstances to divine punishment for committing adultery.

The point is, Job and all these other ancient men knew how destructive adultery could be long before the Mosaic Law and before Solomon penned that same truth into the Word of God in the book of Proverbs. The man or woman whose marriage is violated may do seriously violent things to avenge the wrong inflicted upon the family. Who knows how many murders have been committed of both men and women by both men and women throughout the course of history in order to avenge the hurt of adultery?

---

<sup>2</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 346.

Proverbs 6:32–35 <sup>32</sup>The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; He who would destroy himself does it. <sup>33</sup>Wounds and disgrace he will find, And his reproach will not be blotted out. <sup>34</sup>For jealousy enrages a man, And he will not spare in the day of vengeance. <sup>35</sup>He will not accept any ransom, Nor will he be satisfied though you give many gifts.

In the Sermon on the Mount, some of the commandments were expanded and enhanced for life in the Kingdom including the prohibition on adultery. These things are a matter of the heart whether personal interrelationships are involved or whether they are involving one's relationship with God.

Matthew 5:27–28 <sup>27</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; <sup>28</sup>but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

I thought Dr. Merrill had a fine summary of the actual meaning of adultery encompassing both the human, marriage aspect as well as the spiritual aspect. "Adultery on the human level is unfaithfulness, indeed, covenant violation, and it is an apt analogue to covenant infidelity on a higher plane, the divine-human. The biblical revelation is pervasive with phrases such as 'whoring after other gods,' imagery that speaks of Israel's abandoning the redeeming Sovereign in favor of another who has no covenant claim or legitimacy. Adultery then is the mixing of the true and the false, the holy and the profane, the pure and the corrupt. It is an overstepping of the lines that circumscribe the trusting relationship between partners who have made mutual pledge of loyal commitment. It is covenant rupture of the most serious kind."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "Theology of the Pentateuch" in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 39.

I want everyone to understand that adultery is a sin that is a pardonable offense just like every other personal sin is a pardonable offense. Many believers live life with a guilty conscience over past personal sins (not just adultery), but that sin seems to impose a significant burden of guilt upon people. In terms of our personal, temporal human relationships, that is understandable. Some people agonize over whether or not they have committed the unpardonable sin or have done something so egregious they can never be forgiven, but that thinking is wrong and it is totally unnecessary. Some think they have lost their salvation or have proven they were never saved which is mindset born of faulty theological, soteriological systems. Many people fall into that spiritual trap over committing adultery. Some of this thinking is the result of bad teaching and part of it is the result of a guilty conscience, but Christ remedied the sin problem once for all time on the cross and on that basis, unbelievers may be brought to faith and believers may be restored to fellowship. That does not mean adultery is not an extremely serious offense within the body of Christ because it is, and it is a serious offense against one's spouse and one's family unit including extended family. That also doesn't mean it can't or won't result in temporal consequences; it can and it will and very often that will manifest itself in the form of the destruction of the family unit. It does mean it can be forgiven and restoration can be accomplished within the family unit, within the family of God, and with the Lord. Finally, it is no less true that spiritual adultery, left unchecked, results in the

destruction of the family of God. Once it gets started in a family, it spreads like an infection and leads people away from God and into paganism.

The next commandment references theft.

Exodus 20:15      <sup>15</sup>“You shall not steal” [גָּנַב].

Steal, גָּנַב, means to steal, to be a thief. It refers to taking things without permission by the owner but usually by stealth and not by force. It may be used to indicate a kidnapping which implies a carrying or a stealing away. It also has figurative uses. For example, Genesis 31:20 reads in part, “And Jacob deceived Laban...,” but it literally reads “And stole Jacob heart Laban” [וַיִּגְנַב יַעֲקֹב אֶת לֵב לָבָן] which in English, we would say “and Jacob stole Laban (the Arameans) heart.”

There are other words meaning to rob someone which implies the use of force to steal something from someone one of which is קָבַע. It means to rob, to plunder, and to exploit; it refers to theft or stealing either by means of force or deception. This kind of theft is included in prohibition of the commandment not to steal. Another word used in the same way is גָּזַל which is considered to be a synonym of גָּנַב, steal.

Some Rabbinic traditions claim the word גָּנַב refers only to kidnapping because the word is used in that context in Exodus 21:16.

Exodus 21:16      <sup>16</sup>“He who kidnaps [גָּנַב] a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death.

The context argues against this restrictive meaning. In Exodus 20:15, the word is not qualified in any way; therefore, it is reasonable to believe it refers to theft in general terms. Further, this part of the Decalogue is addressing interpersonal re-

relationships and theft is a common problem affecting people whereas kidnapping is a comparatively rare occurrence, although it does happen and it is traumatic when it does, which serves to make theft the more desirable understanding here. One could easily understand kidnapping to be the theft of a person.

A common means of theft during biblical times was using deceptive weights to measure various commodities either in buying them or in selling them. This was mentioned a number of times in the Bible including the Torah.

Leviticus 19:35–36 <sup>35</sup>You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measurement of weight, or capacity. <sup>36</sup>You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin; I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 25:13–16 <sup>13</sup>You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a large and a small. <sup>14</sup>You shall not have in your house differing measures, a large and a small. <sup>15</sup>You shall have a full and just weight; you shall have a full and just measure, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. <sup>16</sup>For everyone who does these things, everyone who acts unjustly is an abomination to the LORD your God.

Solomon addressed the issue in Proverbs and indicated that honest weights and measures were a concern of the Lord. Yahweh wanted His people to deal honestly and fairly with one another and with those outside the covenant community with whom they had business dealings. By means of application, He wants all those who belong to Him to do the same.

Proverbs 16:11 <sup>11</sup>A just balance and scales belong to the LORD; All the weights of the bag are His concern.

Proverbs 20:10, 23 <sup>10</sup>Differing weights and differing measures, Both of them are abominable to the LORD. ... <sup>23</sup>Differing weights are an abomination to the LORD, And a false scale is not good.

Moving the boundary markers delineating the property lines of a person's property was considered to be a very serious theft in Israel.

Deuteronomy 27:17 <sup>17</sup>'Cursed is he who moves his neighbor's boundary mark...'

Proverbs 23:10 <sup>10</sup>Do not move the ancient boundary...

Hosea 5:10 <sup>10</sup>The princes of Judah have become like those who move a boundary; On them I will pour out My wrath like water.

It is mind boggling to realize just how many different ways people can steal something from someone else. One can steal something in a stealth manner at a time and place in which one expects not to be noticed. It can be brazen and done in front of large numbers of people if the thief simply acts like he belongs there and is carrying on as usual. Many shoplifters do this by simply walking out of a store with a basket full of goods. People can enter a home while the residents are away and steal their property which we call a residential burglary, or they can enter a closed business and steal from it which we call a commercial burglary. When a vehicle is broken into, it is called an auto burglary. People can enter a home while the residents are there and forcibly steal from them which is called a home invasion robbery. Taking something from a person by using physical force is a strong-arm robbery and using a weapon of any kind to steal from someone is an armed robbery. Fraud is a way to steal from people. Deceptive business practices and false advertising are ways to commit theft.



People entrusted with money or property may steal from that which is entrusted to them which is what we call embezzlement. People may write bad checks or use stolen credit cards or file false insurance claims to steal from others. And so it goes... The mind of fallen man apparently knows no limits to the methods used when it comes to stealing something of value from other people.

Obviously, this commandment is very broad and it is intended to protect the property rights of people so they may enjoy that for which they have labored. It is amazing to realize just how many people think they are entitled to things other people have worked long and hard in order to purchase. Any way that a person can think of to appropriate something from someone else without compensating them for it is a violation of this commandment. Society would be in chaos if everyone could steal everything everybody else worked for and there would be no incentive to work. Implied in this commandment is the fact of the private ownership of property. Also implied in this commandment is the fact there are things people need in order to live and thieves deprive them of the ability to conduct their lives in a safe, stable manner. For example, stealing someone's food means he won't eat. Stealing someone's clothes means he won't be properly prepared to face the elements not to mention going out into society. Stealing someone's mode of transportation means he can't get to work. Stealing someone's tools for making a living means that person can no longer be productive and provide for himself and his family. Theft is not a harmless crime; it can be incredibly destructive and it induces fear in people's hearts be-

cause their sense of security has been violated when it happens especially when the home is violated or the victim is personally threatened and/or physically assaulted during the theft.

There is also a spiritual element to this commandment. Stealing from believers is akin to stealing from God. Believers are to be good stewards with all God has graced them which means using one's wealth in ways that help others and glorify God in the process. When someone steals from a believer, they are not only stealing from God and from the believer, but they are stealing from those in need who would have benefited from those resources. They are also stealing from those who would have spiritually benefited from the use of the stolen funds or goods in missionary and teaching endeavors.

In terms of the spiritual application of this commandment, Dr. Merrill applied it to all people, saved and unsaved, but that seems to be a stretch because unbelievers do not recognize any responsibility to God in terms of how they view their personal possessions and they do not recognize God's call on those possessions. "You shall not steal" (Ex. 20:15) takes on its proper and fullest meaning only as one recognizes that all people (and especially Israel) are vassals of the Creator-Redeemer God who has gifted them and who expects reasonable stewardship of them. The King has not only allocated realms of authority and responsibility but has also given each vassal the means by which to achieve on the earth what He has in view for each. To steal, therefore, is to commit at least three sins against the King: (1) to take from another what he has been giv-

en and needs in order to exercise his stewardship; (2) to fail to fulfill one's own assignment on the basis of what God has given; and (3) to undermine the wise purposes of God who gives to each according to his role and ability. All things, material and immaterial, belong to God and must be dispensed by His gracious pleasure."<sup>4</sup>

If Dr. Merrill had restricted these comments to believers, I would agree with him, but he didn't do that. Unbelievers are not vassals of God; they have no covenant relationship with Him. They do not know or they know and reject any responsibility to manage their resources as responsible stewards. That's what happened to Nebuchadnezzar when he exalted himself over God for all the things he had accomplished in Babylon. Are unbelievers subjecting themselves to God's authority and exercising the authority He expects of His people? Of course not. They may have the responsibility to do that as created creatures of God, but they reject it.

Daniel 4:30 <sup>30</sup>"The king reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'

I'm not saying God won't hold unbelievers accountable for how they manage their resources. God warned Nebuchadnezzar to change his ways and he refused and lost his mind for seven years, but most unbelievers will give an ac-

---

<sup>4</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "Theology of the Pentateuch" in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 39.

count at the Great White Throne Judgment when they attempt to justify themselves to the Lord by their works.

I agree with his assessment of how theft is a sin against God, but that is particularly applicable to believers. The first thing God requires of unbelievers is to become believers before He ever places any kind of materialistic stewardship responsibility on them. When an unbeliever steals from a believer, the sinful consequences Dr. Merrill identified certainly attach themselves to the theft, but that only affects the believer, at least in temporal terms. The unbeliever doesn't care about personal sins against God; he is already immersed in the ultimate sin which is unbelief.

The penalty for theft was repayment in double the amount stolen.

Exodus 22:7–9      <sup>7</sup>“If a man gives his neighbor money or goods to keep *for him* and it is stolen from the man's house, if the thief is caught, he shall pay double. <sup>8</sup>“If the thief is not caught, then the owner of the house shall appear before the judges, *to determine whether he laid his hands on his neighbor's property.* <sup>9</sup>“For every breach of trust, *whether it is for ox, for donkey, for sheep, for clothing, or for any lost thing about which one says, 'This is it,'* the case of both parties shall come before the judges; he whom the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbor.

God established personal property rights and He takes those rights seriously. People are to respect the property of other people and refrain from stealing it from them. Believers have a responsibility to wisely, as good stewards of all that belongs to God, utilize the property they have been granted by God so that wealth may be used for the good of the cause of Christ and the glory of God.