

**Series: Ten Keys to the Joyful Life**  
**#8: “To Give or Take”**  
**Exodus 20:15 and Luke 19:1-10 (NIV)**  
By John Gill

Today we come to the eighth commandment. For thousands of years, rabbis and scribes, priests and philosophers have waxed eloquent as they have attempted to capture the essence of this divine utterance – this eighth commandment of God. But none has come closer to unlocking the deep profundity of this commandment than the greatest literary genius, social commentator, philosopher and theologian of the 20th century: Dr. Seuss.

Of course, I’m speaking of his classic parable on sin and redemption, “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.” No doubt you have read it, or at least have seen its TV or movie versions. It is set in the mythical village of “Who-ville,” on the eve of Christmas. And it opens like this:

*“Every Who down in Who-ville liked Christmas a lot . . .  
but the Grinch, who lived just north of Who-ville, did NOT.  
The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!  
Now, please don’t ask why. No one quite knows the reason.  
It could be his head wasn’t screwed on just right.  
It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.  
But I think that the most likely reason of all  
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.”*

And I’m sure you remember what happens - - - He comes up with a dastardly scheme – to “steal” Christmas. He dresses up like Santa, and when everyone in the village is asleep, he systematically steals everything related to Christmas . . . the gifts, the toys, the food for Christmas dinner – even the decorations!

*“Then the last thing he took was the log for the fire!  
Then he went up the chimney, himself, the old liar.  
On their walls he left nothing but hooks and some wire.  
And the one speck of food that he left in the house  
Was a crumb that was even too small for a mouse.  
Then he did the same thing to the other Who’ houses  
Leaving crumbs much too small for the other Who’s mouses!”*

Yes, perhaps no character in all of 20th century literature personifies the “sin of stealing” more graphically than the Grinch. His name has even become part of our lexicon: Everyone knows what you mean if you call someone a “grinch” = someone who, not only takes what doesn’t belong to him, but who gets some demented pleasure out of trying to steal other people’s joy, as well. Maybe if God were giving this command today, he might have said, “Don’t be a grinch!” and we would instantly understand what he meant.

But, obviously, that’s not exactly how he put it. God used words those ancient Hebrews would understand: Plainly – “Thou shalt not steal.” Of course, way back then, the command was very

clear. That's because those Hebrew slaves, so recently freed and wondering around the desert, who first heard these words had very little that was worth stealing. Even when they got settled in the Promised Land, they still had precious few possessions someone might want to steal – maybe a sheep, or a cloak, or a piece of jewelry. In that context, the command is pretty plain: “Keep your hands to yourself!”

But how are we, in our modern, 21st century, supposed to react to this command? Not only do we have exponentially more things that can be stolen, but a seemingly infinite variety of ways to steal from one another. Nowadays we can break this command against stealing without ever technically “stealing” anything.

What do I mean? Let me give you a few examples of the creative ways we steal:

- Many people cheat on their tax return by under-reporting their income;
- Employees sometime don't work all the hours they are paid for. And it's not uncommon for employees to steal from their company by embezzling funds, or at the least, taking home office supplies.
- And, employers may cheat their employees by underpaying them, or deliberately laying them off just before they might qualify for retirement benefits.
- People on Wall Street manipulate the stock market and take advantage of insider trading.
- Insurance costs today are sky-rocketing because people file frivolous or bogus claims and law-suites.
- Stores and businesses regularly over-charge their unsuspecting customers or try to sell them items or services they really don't need.
- Sometimes they practice price-gouging when there are shortages and people are at their mercy, like we've seen before and after hurricanes.
- And we all are aware that businesses routinely over-charge the government, wasting billions of tax-dollars . . . (remember those \$600 toilet seats?).

You see, today there are unlimited ways to steal – ways to take what doesn't belong to us. And we don't see it as stealing because we don't know the people whose money we are taking. True, the victims may be faceless, but there are victims, none the less. Somewhere along the way, we have begun to believe that if we can't SEE the victim of our stealing, then it isn't really stealing – it's “creative financing,” or “watching the bottom line,” or “beating the system.” But stealing is still stealing, and there always are victims.

But therein lies the fallacy in our thinking. The main victim is NOT the one from whom something is stolen. The primary victim of stealing is the one who steals. Whether merely shoplifting a pack of gum or fleecing the government's coffers for millions, the effect on the thief is the same . . . There is a high personal price to pay for breaking this commandment. What price?

When someone steals, at least four things begin to happen to him or her:

- 1) Stealing weakens our conscience and lowers our resistance to temptation.

Law enforcement officers will tell you that this is true. A law-abiding citizen who has never committed a crime in his or her life doesn't just wake up one morning and decide to hold-up a bank or rob a convenience store. They always started with more innocent crimes: shoplifting, pick-pocketing, petty theft. And as they lost their moral compass, they worked their way up to the "big stuff."

One of the speakers at one of the Promise Keepers rallies I attended some years back told about his one-and-only experience at stealing. It seems that, when he was a little boy, he went to the store with his aunt. And as the aunt was busy talking with the store's owner, this little boy decided to pocket a plastic water pistol he had his eye on. Well, he didn't know it, but the owner of the store saw him do it, and called him down for it. The man agreed not to report him – IF he agreed just to put it back.

All the way home, the little boy pleaded with his aunt not to tell his mother what had happened (let's just say, he knew his mother would not be very understanding). All the way home, his aunt didn't say a word. But when she got back to the house, she said to his mother, "Do you know what this boy did at the store? I've never been more embarrassed in all my life..." and she proceeded to explain exactly what had happened. Needless to say, that was the first and last time he ever stole anything in his life.

Unfortunately, some people don't ever learn that lesson. They have the MISFORTUNE of getting away with their crime, and gradually, their consciences are compromised, and they no longer have any resistance to temptation. One thing leads to another, until they end up in prison – or worse.

So, you see, cheating on your taxes may not seem like a big deal, but it can compromise your judgment and lead you to even more serious crimes. So, God warns us: "BEWARE!"

2) The second thing that happens when we steal is that we lose our self-respect.

When you get right down to it, there are very few things more valuable in life than self-respect. When we steal, we pay for it by compromising our character – and once our good character has been lost, it's hard to ever get it back. We MAY get away with our crime so that no one will ever know. But WE will know. And we will think less of ourselves because of what we know. Somehow, the opinion others have of us is never as significant as the respect we have for ourselves. A life without self-respect is a dreadful thing.

3) A third price we pay for stealing is that we lose our right-relationship with God.

When God's commands are broken, our relationship with Him is broken, as well. Unrepentant sin, whatever it is, prevents us from experiencing God's love and grace. We have all had the experience of harboring some sin in our hearts, only to wonder why we can't feel God's presence in our lives. The only remedy that will restore a right relationship with God is to confess our guilt, and ask for his forgiveness.

4) The fourth thing that happens when we commit this sin is that our relationship with others is seriously damaged.

Obviously, being guilty of stealing can make us uneasy around others, because we're afraid of being found out. We live in fear. Thieves sometimes confess relief when they are apprehended, because now they won't have to continue living under the dread of being discovered. Stealing can cause us to be constantly hiding from others and looking over our shoulder. It's impossible to develop deep friendships when you have something to hide.

But there's another way our relationships with others are affected. And that is the realization that, if YOU are a thief, perhaps your neighbor is, too. Once a person becomes a thief, he or she has a nagging feeling that everyone else is also "on the make." Therefore, they live in suspicion of everyone around them. It's no fun to live in a society where we can't trust anyone, and the thief condemns himself or herself to such a world.

So, do you see what happens when we steal or cheat people out of their possessions? We don't steal from the grocer, the corporation, or the insurance company so much as we steal from ourselves. The best things in life – the things that last and bring us blessings, are character, a clear conscience, self-respect, and a right relationship with God and others. We lose ALL of these when we steal. That makes stealing a pretty bad bargain!

I think that is why God takes the sin of stealing so seriously. When we steal, we not only hurt others, we cause great harm to ourselves, and ultimately to our relationship with God. So, when we steal, we don't just sin against others, or even ourselves. We sin against God. That's why God insists that we not do it.

In a comprehensive Bible study I have taught in a number of my churches, a course called Disciple Bible Study, one of the exercises we were asked to do as we were considering the Ten Commandments was to attempt to re-state all of the negatively worded commandments in a positive way. That's an interesting exercise. How could you express, "Thou Shalt Not Steal" using a positive phrase?

Perhaps the most obvious way of doing it would be to try to decide what the opposite of "stealing" is. So, maybe the command might be "Thou shalt give, rather than take." Another possible positive wording of this commandment might be, "Thou shalt desire for others what you most desire for yourself."

However you choose to word it, the exercise helps us see this 8th Commandment in its fullest context. You see, God doesn't just want us to REFRAIN from stealing – He wants us to earnestly desire the best for others – "to give, rather than take." That doesn't come naturally to us. It is human nature to want to keep what we have and try to gain more and more, even at the expense of others. But it's NOT the way of God.

Earlier we heard the reading of one of the most familiar stories in the New Testament – the story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was one of those "respectable" thieves – who probably didn't consider himself a thief. He worked as a tax-collector for the Romans who occupied Israel. The way it

worked was that the Romans made him the tax collector for Jericho, and told him how much money he was expected to turn over to the Roman authorities. However, he could charge anything he wanted in taxes, and make a tidy profit for his trouble. Well, Zacchaeus made certain that he milked the townspeople for everything he could, and he became the richest man in town.

As you can imagine, he was also the most unpopular man in town. He had the heart of a thief. And just as we have already described in this message, Zacchaeus paid a high price for his greed. He was a man with no conscience, no self-respect, no relationship with God, and no friends.

Until Jesus came along – and, in one brief encounter, something miraculous happened – his life was dramatically changed: He became a man of high moral character guided by his conscience; he regained his self-respect; his relationship with God was restored; and the people of the town became his trusted friends. All because God changed his heart.

And isn't that exactly what happened to the Grinch? Remember what the story had said his problem was? "His heart was two sizes too small." Like Zacchaeus, the Grinch had the heart of a thief, and it destroyed his life – until he, too, had a change of heart.

After stealing all the trappings of Christmas and retreating with his loaded sled to his mountain hide-away, the Grinch listened down the valley for the sounds of weeping and wailing. And, as Christmas morning dawned he heard something, all right!

*"But the sound wasn't sad! Why, this sound sounded merry!  
It couldn't be so! But it WAS merry! VERY!  
He stared down at Who-ville! The Grinch popped his eyes!  
Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!  
Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,  
was singing! Without any presents at all!  
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! It CAME!  
Somehow or other, it came just the same!*

*And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,  
Stood puzzling and puzzling: 'How could it be so?  
It came without ribbons! It came without tags!  
It came without packages, boxes or bags!!"  
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.  
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!  
'Maybe Christmas,' he thought, 'doesn't come from a store.  
Maybe Christmas . . . perhaps . . . means a little bit more!'*

*And what happened then . . . ? Well . . . in Who-ville they say  
that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day!  
And the minute his heart didn't feel quite so tight,  
He whizzed with his load through the bright morning light.  
And he brought back the toys! And the food for the feast!*

*And he . . . he HIMSELF . . .  
the Grinch carved the roast beast!”*

What kind of condition is YOUR heart in? That’s the real challenge of this 8th commandment. Is yours the heart of a thief – of one who takes from life? Like the Grinch, is your heart “two sizes too small?” If so, you are in grave danger of breaking this commandment.

What you really need is a “heart transplant.”

The good news is that our God is in the “heart transplant business!”

Let us pray:

Create in us clean hearts, O God, and put a new and right spirit within us – a heart of love; a heart of generosity; a heart of compassion – in short, a heart like yours. Amen.