

“Boundaries”

Exodus 20:15; **Matthew 6:25-34** ¹

“So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:27-28). So it was in the beginning.

The Bible’s Creation Account tells us that humankind was put on this earth to multiply and to spread out and to subdue it. We were not merely given permission to enjoy the Earth’s bounty; we were told to “conquer” and to “have dominion.” It would seem, then, that our inclinations of this sort are presented in Genesis not merely as a fact of human nature, but as a *positive* fact – indeed, one of humankind’s first, God-given purposes on earth, part of God’s original blessing.²

What emerges from the biblical account is that property and possession are in some way deeply connected with the essence of who we are, with our very presence in the world as human beings. While not stated in so many words, it seems that owning property carries some kind of spiritual significance. It is, to some extent, through personal property that we discover ourselves, not merely as physical bodies but also as first-person actors with the ability to define ourselves, to grow and expand according to our own decisions, and to influence the world around us.³

The idea of property ownership embraces the physical world not simply as an extension of ourselves, but as the practical embodiment of our God-given freedom. In practice, the increasing or decreasing ownership of property and possessions has to do with increasing or reducing the kinds of choices we have for the direction of our lives.⁴

Recognizing this central role that property plays in human life, the Bible is filled with laws and rules that concern the protection of our own property and consideration for the property of others. In this sense, the Bible anticipated Robert Frost’s famous phrase that “good fences make good neighbors,”⁵ which highlights the fact that there is nothing like solid, enforced laws clarifying where my stuff ends and your stuff begins to give all of us the stability, security, and clarity we need to live fruitful and productive lives.⁶

There is something intuitively true about a worldview that understands respect for property as a foundation stone—indeed, a boundary marker—for respecting the humanity of others. We don’t have to be economists to recognize that societies where property is respected and the freedom to manage one’s own wealth is assured are everywhere more prosperous than those where thievery is rampant and private property is neither encouraged nor sometimes even permitted.⁷

And all of this brings us to the Eighth of the Ten Commandments, which simply says, “*You shall not steal*” (Exodus 20:15). In these four words, we are reminded that other people also have a natural inclination to expand their property and their possessions; that they have every right to do so, just as we do; and that this freedom is just as essential to their humanity as it is

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 9, 2015.

² David Hazony, *The Ten Commandments: How Our Most Ancient Moral Text Can Renew Modern Life* (New York: Scribner, 2010), p. 191.

³ Hazony, pp. 191, 195.

⁴ Hazony, p. 196.

⁵ Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mending_Wall

⁶ Hazony, p. 192.

⁷ Hazony, p. 201.

to our own. If the ban on adultery taught us about love as the ultimate expansion of ourselves into the world, the ban on thievery teaches us that we must shape our expansion so as to allow our neighbors to thrive also.

In the biblical view, such limitation begins with respecting the property of others. One such proscription goes like this: *“Do not move your neighbor’s boundary stone set up by your predecessors in the inheritance you receive in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess”* (Deuteronomy 19:14).⁸

This is actually a very interesting commandment. On the one hand, the Eighth Commandment establishes the theological foundation for our concept of “private property.” On the other hand, the Bible continually reminds us that everything we call “our own” is really just on loan from God.

Further, based on the implications of this commandment, when we violate the property of another person, we are not just committing an act of violence against that person’s extended self; we are to varying degrees assaulting his or her very personhood.⁹

Unfortunately, we humans have devised nearly countless ways of violating the property of other persons, some of the latest being the various forms of cybercrime and identity theft that seem to be proliferating exponentially these days. But the fact is that stealing may take place at any spot on a broad continuum of sinister creativity.

On one end of the continuum we find such theft as office pencils, pens, and stamps. Toward the middle of the continuum we find white collar thieves such as Charles Keating, Kenneth Lay, or Bernie Madoff. On the larger end, there is hardly any limit to our thievery at all. Indeed, many would argue that for governments to run what are euphemistically called “budget deficits” is really a fancy name for stealing.

When considering the many ways in which we violate one another’s boundaries, most of us would probably identify the mugger, the burglar, the car thief, and the bank bandit as thieves. But how about those who rig contracts, bribe officials, manipulate loopholes in the tax laws, or play fast and loose with foreign exchange?

The National White Collar Crime Center has identified fifteen categories of stealing that increase inflationary costs for everyone: check fraud; computer crime; credit card fraud; disaster fraud; embezzlement; environmental crime; health care fraud; identity theft; insurance fraud; Internet fraud (phishing); Internet gambling; money laundering; organized crime; securities fraud; and telemarketing fraud.¹⁰ Some have suggested that the violation of the Eighth Commandment is the single largest cause of inflation, which is itself a form of theft from the poor.

The National Association for Shoplifting Prevention estimates that one in eleven Americans is a shoplifter.¹¹ The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has estimated that 75% of all employees have stolen from their employers at least once, and that one-third of all business failures in this country are the direct result of employee theft.¹² The theft of unlicensed software now amounts

⁸ Hazony, p. 190.

⁹ Hazony, p. 197.

¹⁰ www.nw3C.org

¹¹ www.shopliftingprevention.org/what-we-do/learning-resource-center/statistics

¹² Bob Mather, *“Employee theft: Prevention Beats Apprehension”*

to \$63 billion dollars a year,¹³ not to mention the huge number of songs and movies that are downloaded or shared illegally.

And there are many more ways to steal. Employees can steal from their employers by starting work late; by quitting early; by working slowly; by wasting time; by making personal calls on company time; by taking breaks longer than those authorized; and by doing things on office computers that have nothing to do with work. Employers can steal from their employees by failing to pay fair and livable wages; by failing to pay essential benefits; by misrepresenting things being sold; by overcharging the government; and by employing non-citizens who do not have the legal right to work.

There are many ways in which landlords can steal from their tenants and in which tenants can steal from their landlords. Any of us can fail to report tips to our employers or cash income to the IRS. We can file tax returns or insurance claims that are dishonest in dozens of ways. We can photocopy music or other documents in ways that cheat their authors out of wages they deserve.

Beyond all this, there are some businesses that, even when operated legally and honestly, take advantage of human sinfulness and steal away the health of our common life. The social costs of tobacco sales are twice as great as the taxes they generate.¹⁴ For gambling, these social costs are three-to-one;¹⁵ and for alcohol, social costs vs. taxes are ten-to-one.¹⁶

There seems to be something in the nature of doing business that tends to dull our moral senses. Many persons will do things in the course of doing business that they would never even consider doing in their private lives . . . but that doesn't make these things a bit more honest. Sometimes it would be more honest to call "customary trade practices" and "good business sense" by a less flowery term: *stealing*.

Jim Collins, the well-known business researcher and author, noted that most people would reject out of hand an overt invitation to "cook the books and get rich." But that's not how most people get from A to Z, he says. "When you're at step A, it feels inconceivable to jump all the way to step Z, if step Z involves something that is a total breach of your values. But if you go from step A to step B, then step B to step C, then step C to step D . . . then someday you wake up and discover that you're at step Y, and the move to step Z comes about much easier."¹⁷

Theologically, every time we steal something – whether large or small – we're saying something like this to ourselves: "I need this, and if I don't take it, my well-being will be diminished." But over and over, and over again, God warns us, "*Do not wear yourselves out to get rich; do not trust your own cleverness. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle*" (Proverbs 23:4-5).

God knows that money will not and cannot purchase happiness. God knows that property and possessions, important as they are, can't purchase peace. They never have, and they never will. I think the main idea God wants us to get must be something like this: "I don't want you stealing from each other, because I am your Provider. I want you to understand and to believe that I am the One who will supply all your needs. I don't want you to scheme, manipulate, and

¹³ www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/01/software-piracy-study-bsa_n_1563006.html

¹⁴ <http://www.tobaccofreekids.org/research/factsheets/pdf/0108.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2005-03-vlt-grinols-summary-11-04.pdf>

¹⁶ <http://www.drugstrategies.org/keepingscore1999/pricing.html>

¹⁷ Jim Collins, "Is the Economy Just Built to Flip?" *Fast Company*, October, 2002, 88, 90.

deceive to obtain things. I don't want you to feel responsible for securing your own future. I will do that, if you'll trust me."¹⁸

Jesus actually said it this way: ²⁵*"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?"* ²⁶*Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"* ²⁷*Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"*

²⁸*"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?"* ³¹*So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'"* ³²*For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³**But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well** (Matthew 6:25-33).*

Dave Chapman was a successful CPA who owned his own firm.¹⁹ Dave was a Christian who tried to put his faith into practice. Dave had an employee with a drinking problem, and he decided to send him to a residential rehab program. The problem was how to pay for this treatment, since he had no insurance that covered it.

Then Dave hit on a solution. He personally owned the building his firm occupied—the firm paid him rent. This had been a good tax device over the years. He decided to increase the rent and use that money to pay the rehab bill. In effect, his company would foot the bill. The rent was already high, and each time he increased the rent, Dave was cutting into his company's profit sharing plan, but as an accountant he knew how to make things look okay to the IRS.

Even as Dave decided to do this, though, a voice asked him, "How many times are you going to do this? You've used this trick so often that your profit-sharing plan is really nothing more than smoke and mirrors." Always before Dave had brushed such thoughts away, but this time he couldn't. He realized that although what he had done—and was doing now—was perfectly legal, he was really stealing from his employees.

The next morning, Dave's Bible reading brought him to Luke 19, where he read what Zacchaeus said to Jesus: *"I will give half my wealth to the poor . . . and if I have overcharged people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"* And Jesus responded, *"Salvation has come to this home today"* (vv. 8-9).

Dave slammed his Bible shut as if it had bitten him. He sat there for a moment, stunned. Then, reluctantly, he opened the Bible and read the passage again. The meaning was perfectly clear: he should not merely pay his employee's expenses himself; he should make restitution for the money he had, in a sense, stolen from his associates.

Dave began calculating what this would cost him. He had never realized before how much security he found in a comfortable bank balance, how profoundly superstitious he was about money. He began to see that as long as he hung onto his bank account as security, he could never trust God completely, and would therefore never fully experience God's blessing. Dave

¹⁸ Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments: Reflections on the Father's Love* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1998), p. 196.

¹⁹ Chuck Colson, *Loving God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 229-230.

decided that he had to do what was right in God's eyes, no matter what the results might be for him or for his family.

Dave Chapman made restitution, not only putting a healthy dent in his personal fortune, but causing himself considerable embarrassment and humiliation as well. Dave wondered sometimes whether he was losing his mind, and he knew that some of his friends thought that. *But Dave also felt a new sense of freedom, and he knew that he had changed in positive and exciting ways he had never before thought possible.*

You've probably heard of the fellow who wrote to a store and said, "I've just become a Christian, and I can't sleep at night because I feel guilty. So here's \$100 of what I owe you. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest." The problem is that this approach doesn't work. *Meticulous honesty is a necessary and essential characteristic of authentic and empowering Christian faith.*

An acquaintance called Pastor Lee Strobel with what he said was an embarrassing request: His little girl had been caught shoplifting from the church bookstore, and he wanted to know if Lee would represent the church so she could come and apologize. The father told Lee that he wanted to use this incident as a teaching moment. Lee agreed—but he had a bigger lesson in mind. Here's how he told the story:

"The next day, the parents and their eight-year-old daughter trooped into my office and sat down. 'Tell me what happened,' I said to the little girl as gently as I could.

"Well,' she said as she started to sniffle, 'I saw a book that I really wanted, but I didn't have any money' Now tears formed in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. I handed her a tissue. 'So I put the book under my coat and took it. I knew it was wrong. I knew I shouldn't do it, but I did. And I'm sorry. I'll never do it again. Honest!'

"I'm so glad you're willing to admit what you did and say you're sorry,' I told her. 'That's very brave, and it's the right thing to do. But what do you think an appropriate punishment would be?'

"She shrugged. I thought for a moment before saying, 'I understand the book cost five dollars. I think it would be fair if you paid the bookstore five dollars, plus three times that amount, which would make the total twenty dollars. Do you think that would be fair?'

"She nodded sadly. 'Yes,' she murmured. She could see the fairness in that. But now there was fear in her eyes. Twenty dollars is a mountain of money for a little kid. Where would she ever come up with that amount of cash?

"I wanted to use this moment to teach her something about Jesus. So I opened my desk drawer, removed my checkbook, and wrote out a check on my personal account for the full amount. I tore off the check and held it out to her. Her mouth dropped open. 'I'm going to pay your penalty so you don't have to. Do you know why I'd do that?' Bewildered, she shook her head. 'Because I love you. Because I care about you. Because you are valuable to me. And please remember this: *That's how Jesus feels about you too. Except even more.*'

"I wish I could find the words to describe the look of absolute relief and joy and wonder that blossomed on her face as she reached out to accept my gift. She was almost giddy with gratitude."²⁰

²⁰ Lee Strobel and Gary Poole, *Experiencing the Passion of Jesus*, (Zondervan, 2004).

And my friends, even though we're all thieves to one extent or another, that's how Jesus feels about us, too. That's how Jesus feels about *you*. Except even *more*.

And so, *do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. . . . For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. **But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*** (Matthew 6:25, 32-33).