

Teen Lesson Ten

Working for the Good of Society

You shall not steal (Exodus 20:15, NRSV).

SCRIPTURE

- Exodus 20:15
- Ephesians 4:28
- 2 Corinthians 9:12

WHAT YOU NEED

- Bibles
- Handout #10.1
- Pencils and pens



PURPOSE

To Know: To steal from someone means you somehow rob them of their personhood. This can occur in large and small ways. It can be through theft of personal possessions as well as refusing to share personal possessions with those in need.

To Value: To really understand what stealing is we must first recognize our responsibility to our neighbor. We must work for the good of our neighbor and not just abstain from evil.

To Apply: What can you do, personally and as a group, to work for the good of your neighbors?

WHAT'S GOING ON?

The last three commandments all deal with our social responsibilities within community. The eighth commandment is a call to recognize our interdependence and to protect the personhood of others by protecting their possessions and ensuring their right to life. The ninth commandment deals with the responsibility to speak truthfully so that justice would prevail within the community. If this commandment were not followed, justice would be severely limited since everything was based on the credibility of the spoken word. The tenth commandment internalizes much of what the eighth commandment is concerned with protecting. The heart that seeks its own good rather than the good of the community is not in line with God's plan for community. In trying to interpret these three commandments separately, it is helpful to understand how they function together in developing a vision for a God-centered, just and compassionate community.

The possessions of families in ancient Israel were essential to their identity. There were not many items that families owned that were designated as simply pleasure or decoration. Everything was significant and contributed to their identity as a family. Possessions were either for survival or they were symbols of their identity. To steal from someone would be a crime against his or her very person for the two were very connected. In our society if someone's house is robbed, an insurance claim is filed and what was stolen is replaced. This was not the case in ancient Israel. To be robbed of possessions was a serious matter for it threatened their very lives.

WHAT'S IT MEAN?

It is a little difficult to understand the full magnitude of this commandment in our society. We have been taught that our possessions are our possessions and result from hard work and individual achievement. We do not have the community emphasis that is seen in the Bible. To understand the full range of this commandment we must grasp the responsibility people had to one another in community. Those with many goods must provide for those with little goods and must not "steal" their right to sustain life.

In our society this commandment is refreshing to those with many possessions because it seems to be an effort to protect them and their possessions. This commandment places a great deal of responsibility, however, on those who possess goods that others do not have. One child is born into a family with only a single-parent whose job barely covers basic expenses. Another is born to privilege. If those "with" do not work for the good of those "without," they are failing to abide by the eighth commandment.

Responding to God's blessings. In the kingdom of God, our goods are not the result of our hard work and individual achievement, but rather are the result of a gracious gift from God. When we understand life in this manner it is easy to see our responsibility to those in need. One person is blessed with resources and accordingly thanks God for the blessing. In response to what they have received they go on to live a carefree, extravagant life for their personal pleasure. Another is also blessed, but responds by living a life of simplicity and uses his or her resources to advance the lives of those in need. Who is following the eighth commandment? Are they both? Is the first person following the eighth commandment if he or she does not take possessions from other people? It would seem that the answer is "no." The first person may not have physically taken anything from somebody, but his or her failure to use his or her resources for the benefit of the community is a failure to live out God's commandments.

Rationale for not stealing. In Ephesians 4:28 Paul wrote, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his hands, that he may have something to share with those in need." What is most interesting about this admonition from the apostle is his rationale for thieves to stop stealing. He does not attempt to persuade thieves that people's property is for their own use and must not be infringed upon by others. He doesn't even mention the rights of the individual. This does not mean that these arguments are not valid. For the apostle, however, the reason thieves are to stop stealing is that they have a responsibility to contribute to their society. They are not to take from those who have but rather are to provide for those who have not. The same heartbeat is in the eighth commandment. The people of God must see beyond their own needs and use their time, energy, and resources for the betterment of the community.

Interactive Lesson Guide

GETTIN' GOIN'

Open the class session with two role-plays. Two people are needed for each. In the first role-play, a mother (or father) is shopping with her (or his) child. As they leave the store, the security buzzer goes off and a Nintendo game is found in the child's pocket. The manager agrees to allow the parent to handle the situation. What might the parent say to communicate the eighth commandment to his or her child?

After the role-play, ask **What reasons were we given to abstain from stealing as children? If you were the parent, what reasons might you give?**

The second role-play involves a teen who discovers that his or her best friend has been stealing clothes and CDs. The students are to act out what might occur the next time the two friends are together. What's the best way to confront the theft?

Ask **What happens to people who are robbed? Have you ever noticed how people respond to burglary?** Burglary often creates a distrust of people. Sometimes security measures are taken to protect one's possessions.

DIG IT

Read Exodus 20:15. Ask **What are some subtle forms of stealing for which we need to be on guard?** (Using the office copy machine for personal business; "forgetting" to return a friend's book; keeping the extra change a clerk gave you by mistake; etc.).

Discuss how Israel understood this commandment using the background material provided above. Share with the students the effects of living in a subsistence economy that required reliance upon one another. Discuss the distinctions between our culture and the culture of the text. Ask **What is the impact of stealing from another person in a culture where the people rely on each other? How are things different in our culture where individualism is stressed?**

Say **This commandment seems pretty clear. The message is simply "don't steal!" It's something our parents probably taught us and is one of the few areas that doesn't seem open for interpretation. Everyone has the right to his or her own possessions. If someone infringes upon this right it is a direct violation against that person.**

One of the reasons this commandment seems so basic is due to the level with which we have bought into the "American dream." Everyone has the right to acquire "goods" for his or her own happiness. This pursuit is central to one's identity. The more one achieves and the higher one climbs the ladder of success, the more important and recognized they become. In many ways, this is the basis of value in our society. In our society the act of stealing is wrong because it threatens one's identity.



The motivation behind this commandment is different though. Rather than a "radical individualism," this commandment is concerned with the needs of the community. People must not steal from one another because of their interconnection and reliance upon one another.

Share the scenario of the two responses to money in the Responding to God's Blessing section above. Ask In these two scenarios, who followed the eighth commandment? Are they both? Is there anything more to this commandment than the prohibition against stealing? Can a person steal without actually taking someone's possessions? **Ask the students to provide an example.**

Use the What's It Mean? section above to teach the students the main concern of this commandment. The students need to realize that there is more here than abstaining from stealing. The reason they are not to steal is because they have a responsibility to their community.

Ask **What changes might we need to make to take better care of each other?**

Read Ephesians 4:28. Ask **What does Paul tell us about his work ethic? What are the benefits of hard work? What is the reason Paul gives for thieves to give up stealing and go to work?** (To have something to share with others.)

Distribute Handout #10.1, Open Hand Living. In light of the previous discussion, have the students reword the eighth commandment as a positive statement. Have the students create a list of ways that this commandment might be fulfilled. After reading 2 Corinthians 9:12, explore how our service to others is an expression of thanks to God.

TAKE OUT

In closing, have the students create a service project the class can do together. Look for a way the students can "give back" to the community. The project might flow naturally out of your work on Handout #10.1.

Or, if you would rather that the students work individually, invite them to come up with a plan where they can live out the positive light of this commandment throughout the week. Say **Think about people you encounter throughout the week who are in need. It could be students, teachers, or even casual acquaintances. Their need may not even be physical. What can you do this week to work for their good?**

Close with prayer.



Open Hand Living

Restate the intention of the eighth commandment, "You shall not steal," as a positive statement.

<u>List some of the needs that you see in the community.</u>	<u>List ways you and your friends might meet these needs.</u>

Read 2 Corinthians 9:12. How is it that "open hand living" becomes an expression of thanks to God?