

You Shall Not Steal

By
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*“You shall not steal.”
-Exodus 20:15*

Like the other commandments that we have spoken about, this commandment seems relatively straightforward. However, when we analyze it, not merely as a prohibition from taking things that don't belong to us, but instead as a foundational commandment designed to guide us towards loving God and our neighbor, as well as honoring our true nature given to us by God, it becomes a little more complex.

Like the previous commandments not to murder or commit adultery, this commandment presumes a certain fact about reality regarding private property. In order to commit the sin of theft, we first have to live in a world in which private property exists. After all, if there is no private ownership, there could be no theft. Which means, that what this commandment is really about is the protection, and sanctity of, private ownership.

For most of human history, this would be a completely uncontroversial idea, the concept of private property goes all the way back to the earliest recorded human societies. While these ancient societies had an interesting tribal ethic, in which the sanctity of property really only applied to members of their “tribe”, they would still find this ethic fairly straightforward. It is only in the modern era that this concept has been under attack, so before we explore this commandment, we must first understand where this attack is coming from and why it is dangerous.

The Origin of Property

“...therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.”

-Genesis 3:23-24

When the Christian reads through the Law we do so in the context of the doctrine of original sin. In other words, we understand that there was an original intent for man that

has been corrupted by our sin, and that the Law of God is leading us back to. It is this original sin, the rebellion against God, that is the source of all evil upon the earth, and it is that same rebellion that Christ came to quell by dying as a rebel, and leading His people home to pursue God as sons intent on honoring Him.

We will discuss this point more later, but when we read God's original intent we can see that private property was a part of man's nature before God when we dwelt with Him in paradise:

"Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

-Genesis 1:28

God gives mankind a unique commandment amongst His creation. We are told to not merely live in the creation of God, but to "subdue it" and "have dominion" over the other created things. This means that God intended for Adam and Eve to exercise *ownership* and *autonomy* over the garden and, as their generations filled the earth, to have that same type of ownership over the world. But this "dominion" was only possible through the principle of "stewardship". Meaning that since mankind was subordinate to God, our ownership was only actualized *through* our obedience to God, as we can see in the next chapter:

"The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

-Genesis 2:8-9

"Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it."

-Genesis 2:15

Ownership and Responsibility

It was this principle of stewardship that was communicated through these first commandments. While we did have ownership over the garden, we didn't have the liberty to do to the garden all that we might wish. Beyond that, the commandment taught us that ownership was linked to responsibility. Adam couldn't just sit in the garden and call it his own, he had to tend the garden and keep it. By being responsible for the

garden, in accordance with God's law, Adam and Eve enjoyed liberty in God's kingdom and ownership within His paradise.

This principle of ownership and responsibility then becomes a symbol of the human soul. For just as God gives Adam autonomy over the garden to tend and keep it, He has also given Adam autonomy over his own body and soul to tend and to keep it. And just as nature, when left to its innate design, grows wild and unkempt, so does the soul man.

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God..."

-1 Thessalonians 4:3-5

If we do not maintain ourselves, our desires grow wild, unchecked, and capable of great sin, which is exactly what Satan targets in his temptations.

"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate."

-Genesis 3:6

Satan didn't *create* Eve's attraction to the tree, he merely exploited those desires in his temptation. But, since the soul is immaterial and hard to understand, we don't learn this lesson directly from the soul, but instead we *apply* what we learn about ownership to our soul. This is a profound point that is widely ignored in the modern church. In the modern church the language that we tend to use in relation to our sanctification is that of "victory". We talk of sin as something that can be "defeated" in an ultimate sense through a type of spiritual breakthrough. This however is a relatively new concept. Take the following two quotes as an example from two different English preachers separated by two centuries:

"The two great graces essential to a saint in this life, are faith and repentance. These are the two wings by which he flies to heaven. Faith and repentance preserve the spiritual life—as heat and water preserve the physical life... Repentance is never out of season; it is of as frequent use as the artificer's tool or the soldier's weapon. If I am not mistaken, practical points are more needful in this age than controversial and disputable matters."

-Thomas Watson - "The Doctrine of Repentance"

“Repentance, moreover, is never perfect in any man in this mortal state. We never get perfect faith so as to be entirely free from doubting. And we never get repentance which is free from some hardness of heart. The most sincere penitent that you know will feel himself to be partially impenitent. Repentance is also a continual lifelong act. It will continually grow. I believe a Christian on his deathbed will more bitterly repent than he ever did before. It is a thing to be done all your lifelong. Sinning and repenting— sinning and repenting make up a Christian’s life! Repenting and believing in Jesus—repenting and believing in Jesus make up the consummation of his happiness!”

-Charles Spurgeon

While these sentiments are relatively foreign to us today, they were ubiquitous in the ancient world. This is why our pagan ancestors frequently went to sacrifice before their pagan deities. There was an innate belief that they had to tend their souls as frequently and as often as a gardener tends their garden. Just as there will never be a time in which a garden is free from corruption, so our souls will never be free from temptation.

This doesn’t mean that we can’t find levels of victory and growth in our relationship with God, quite the contrary. Just that this growth comes through the same principle that grows a garden, a career, or a family, *discipline*. Without this one single virtue there can be no consistent growth.

This is why good parents give their children something to take care of, whether it is their rooms, various chores in the house, or even just their clothing. It is through *ownership* that the first inclinations of personal responsibility are taught.

But the inverse is true, without any ownership, it is almost impossible to understand the concept of responsibility. This is what we have already seen in the nation of Israel:

“Therefore the people contended with Moses, and said, “Give us water, that we may drink.” So Moses said to them, “Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the LORD?” And the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses, and said, “Why is it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”

-Exodus 17:2-3

In their complaint, it never really occurs to them that they have any responsibility to look for water or seek God’s wisdom or counsel to find water, they merely feel entitled to receive water, and when they don’t get it their only recourse is to blame. We have to remember that the Israelites were slaves who had no ability to own private property. Because of that, they never had a reason to be responsible for anything. This is why

they complain against Moses, and why they have no ability to handle any of their own problems:

“And so it was, on the next day, that Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood before Moses from morning until evening. So when Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he did for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit, and all the people stand before you from morning until evening?” And Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God.”

-Exodus 18:13-15

Not only do they have no ability to deal with their own conflicts, but even the leadership in the community is totally dependent on Moses. However, we see the same principle at play with the elites in Egypt.

“Then Pharaoh’s servants said to him, “How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the LORD their God. Do you not yet know that Egypt is destroyed?”

-Exodus 10:7

We know from the text that this Pharaoh didn’t work for the prosperity of Egypt, he merely inherited a world of order from the hard work of his ancestors. As such, he doesn’t respect the delicate balance that he had inherited and treats his position trivially. Even when Egypt is on the verge of ruin, he won’t repent, even out of vain self-interest. While this is attached to his sin of pride, it is also due to his lack of responsibility.

He didn’t know how hard it was to produce the level of prosperity that he had inherited, but also, he didn’t actually have responsibility for any of these things, he had officials and bureaucrats that managed all these things for him. Because of this, he had no idea that his actions were creating a multi-generational cataclysm for his entire nation.

The modern prosperity of the west is what has caused this problem for us. Most of us living today have been born in the current prosperity of our country with no clear idea of how we got this way. We work at well established companies, attend old universities, and live off of all the infrastructure given to us by our ancestors. Beyond that, our modern prosperity has allowed us to hire other people to maintain things for us. We hire maids, contractors, mechanics, bankers, and many other professions to maintain our lives for us. This has widely removed the concept of responsibility from us and it has skewed our view of ownership.

I really like the book "The Little Prince", which was adapted into a very charming animated film recently. This book was written in France in the 1940's, and even here the author could see the growing problem with modern society when it came to the concept of "ownership". In this fantastical book, the author has a simple young boy go to different "planets" in order to understand the confusing concept of modern adulthood and what is important. In one seen, the little prince encounters a businessman on one planet who is obsessed with owning the stars:

"I own the stars, because nobody else before me ever thought of owning them."

"Yes, that is true," said the little prince. "And what do you do with them?"

"I administer them," replied the businessman. "I count them and recount them. It is difficult. But I am a man who is naturally interested in matters of consequence."

The little prince was still not satisfied. "If I owned a silk scarf," he said, "I could put it around my neck and take it away with me. If I owned a flower, I could pluck that flower and take it away with me. But you cannot pluck the stars from heaven..."

"No. But I can put them in the bank."

"Whatever does that mean?"

"That means that I write the number of my stars on a little paper. And then I put this paper in a drawer and lock it with a key."

"And that is all?"

"That is enough," said the businessman.

"It is entertaining," thought the little prince. "It is rather poetic. But it is of no great consequence." On matters of consequence, the little prince had ideas which were very different from those of the grown-ups.

"I myself own a flower," he continued his conversation with the businessman, "which I water every day. I own three volcanoes, which I clean out every week (for I also clean out the one that is extinct; one never knows). It is of some use to my volcanoes, and it is of some use to my flower, that I own them. But you are of no use to the stars..."

-Antoine de Saint-Exupéry - "The Little Prince"

When ownership is divorced from responsibility, as it is for the modern person, it becomes trivial and abstract. It no longer teaches us this vital lesson and instead becomes an exercise in greed and status.

Stewardship

"The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into the world by his order, and

about his business; they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure:"

-John Locke - "The Second Treatise on Government"

Attached to responsibility is the concept of stewardship. To steward something is to maintain responsibility for something on behalf of another. This was a common role in the ancient world, where a wealthy landowner or lord would give responsibility, or stewardship, of some aspect of their estate, like the home, or a field. Though the steward was usually given a fair amount of autonomy in their role, they were not to attend to the property in accordance to their own desires, but in accordance with their masters.

By giving Adam and Eve parameters in how they were to take dominion of the earth, God is demonstrating to mankind that they are stewards of the earth and not direct owners. This fact then helps us understand the whole of human existence. Though God has given mankind freewill and autonomy over our bodies, our minds, and our property, this ownership is in relationship to God's ultimate sovereignty over the creation. And since God's sovereignty over the universe is absolute, to violate His will is to violate the very nature of reality, this in turn has extreme consequences.

"And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

-Romans 12:2

When Paul calls the will of God good, acceptable, and perfect, he is saying that the will of God accords perfectly with the natural law. This means that the law that Moses is dictating to the people of Israel is not a set of arbitrary commandments, but is instead an expression of God's divine law that guards the creation, whether we believe in God or not. To violate God's law is to violate the very structure of the universe and therefore it has severe immediate, and eternal consequences attached to it. This reinforces this concept of stewardship, since all things ultimately belong to God, our form of ownership is only possible in accordance with His divine rule:

"Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."

-1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Because of this, as a part of the Jews liberation from Egypt, God has His people ask for various possessions from the Egyptian people, and it is these same goods that God asks for in order to build up the tabernacle. This same principal is then shown in various

other sacrifices and offerings that God asks for His people, even going down to the offering of the firstborn to God:

“You shall not delay to offer the first of your ripe produce and your juices. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me. “Likewise you shall do with your oxen and your sheep. It shall be with its mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me.”
-Exodus 22:29-30

All of these practices were performed for this same purpose, to remind the people of God that the possessions that God had given to them was not actually theirs, but ultimately belonged to their Father in heaven. It is this very lesson that parents try to teach their children when they give them their first possessions. Though a parent will give a kid a toy, the child is not free to use the toy however they please, the parent will place certain restrictions on their usage and even demand a type of maintenance and care for that toy. All of this prepares the child to learn this all important lesson.

This concept is, again, difficult for the modern person. We speak so much about the concept of bodily autonomy and liberty that we forget this simple principle, ownership is attached to responsibility, that responsibility is ultimately to God. This is why the debate surrounding abortion boils down to personal autonomy for those on the pro-life side. For them, even if they feel that abortion is not a good choice, they feel strongly that removing the choice from the woman is a type of tyranny.

This mindset reflects the modern mindset of ownership. That if my body is truly mine, then I can do with it whatever I please. The doctrine of stewardship teaches us something very different. That even though God has granted me autonomy over my body, I am merely stewarding God’s possession. But again, as ownership and responsibility fade from our consciousness, the concept of stewardship was always destined to follow.

Creativity

The other interesting thing about Adam in the garden is that the vocation of gardener has aesthetic connotations that almost supersede its practical connotations. After all, in paradise, nothing was really *needful* in any ultimate sense. In other words, there didn’t seem to be any real danger of starvation in Eden. That means that Adam and Even being instructed to tend and keep the garden seems to be more of an aesthetic commandment, to make the garden more beautiful, to “adorn” the beauty of God’s natural creation through the intentional ingenuity of mankind.

Though I would love to speak more exhaustively about this topic, it seems as though, being made in the image and likeness of God means that mankind has at its core, a need to be “fulfilled” more than our need to be merely “filled”. While an animal can be kept in an ugly pen, fed with bland food, and kept from any type of transcendent meaning, all while seeming fairly happy and fulfilled, a human being can’t. Even locked in the deepest pit, man searches for more than their “daily bread”, they seek fulfillment and beauty even in their greatest despair, and maybe *because* of their deep despair. Viktor Frankl was a Holocaust survivor and he wrote about strange, impromptu art that occurred in the concentration camp:

“Earlier, I mentioned art. Is there such a thing in a concentration camp? It rather depends on what one chooses to call art. A kind of cabaret was improvised from time to time. A hut was cleared temporarily, a few wooden benches were pushed or nailed together and a program was drawn up. In the evening those who had fairly good positions in camp—the Capos and the workers who did not have to leave camp on distant marches— assembled there. They came to have a few laughs or perhaps to cry a little; anyway, to forget. There were songs, poems, jokes, some with underlying satire regarding the camp. All were meant to help us forget, and they did help. The gatherings were so effective that a few ordinary prisoners went to see the cabaret in spite of their fatigue even though they missed their daily portion of food by going.”

-Viktor Frankl - “Man’s Search For Meaning”

Frankl here mentions that the art was there to help them “forget” their present distress, and this is undoubtedly true, but it also caused them to “remember” the joy beyond the walls of their distress. It gave them hope and inspired them to keep going. Even in the pit, they wasted their precious free moments, and their remaining energy to create art. This fits nicely in what we read in the Scripture, part of our purpose in life surrounds our need to create and enjoy beauty.

True and genuine creation though, can only happen within a framework of ownership. This is one reason why the freest societies tend to create the best art. If an artist is coerced into creation, and can have no autonomy over their creation, their inspiration dries up. It is no longer an act of creation, but merely an act of submission. And the first acts of creation occur when someone has their first belongings. At a small scale, this is what happens when a child gets to cut the hair of a doll, mismatch various clothes, or even draw on a toy that was given to them. Knowing that something is theirs, gives the child the desire, and the freedom, to make it unique to them. Their creativity is a “stamp” of their ownership on what was given to them. This principle extends upwards to the ownership of property. Take this quote from the British novelist and philosopher G.K. Chesterton:

“For the mass of men the idea of artistic creation can only be expressed by an idea unpopular in present discussions—the idea of property. The average man cannot cut clay into the shape of a man; but he can cut earth into the shape of a garden; and though he arranges it with red geraniums and blue potatoes in alternate straight lines, he is still an artist; because he has chosen. The average man cannot paint the sunset whose colors he admires; but he can paint his own house with what color he chooses, and though he paints it pea green with pink spots, he is still an artist; because that is his choice. Property is merely the art of the democracy. It means that every man should have something that he can shape in his own image, as he is shaped in the image of heaven. But because he is not God, but only a graven image of God, his self-expression must deal with limits; properly with limits that are strict and even small.”

-Gk Chesterton - “What’s Wrong With the World”

This means that the modern world would have been a monstrosity to Chesterton. Seeing that the majority of people no longer have the ability to own property, but merely rent cookie cutter dwellings in which they can only, superficially, change things, only to have them changed back when they inevitably move. Personal property seems to be central to human happiness and flourishing, which is why God was sure to guarantee that even the poorest of His people had ancestral land that they couldn’t permanently sell.

“The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me. ‘And in all the land of your possession you shall grant redemption of the land. ‘If one of your brethren becomes poor, and has sold some of his possession, and if his redeeming relative comes to redeem it, then he may redeem what his brother sold. ‘Or if the man has no one to redeem it, but he himself becomes able to redeem it, ‘then let him count the years since its sale, and restore the remainder to the man to whom he sold it, that he may return to his possession. ‘But if he is not able to have it restored to himself, then what was sold shall remain in the hand of him who bought it until the Year of Jubilee; and in the Jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his possession. ‘If a man sells a house in a walled city, then he may redeem it within a whole year after it is sold; within a full year he may redeem it. ‘But if it is not redeemed within the space of a full year, then the house in the walled city shall belong permanently to him who bought it, throughout his generations. It shall not be released in the Jubilee. ‘However the houses of villages which have no wall around them shall be counted as the fields of the country. They may be redeemed, and they shall be released in the Jubilee.”

-Leviticus 25:23-31

God did this because He knew that the heart of a country's elites was to imperialistically seek more and more land to own. God wanted to curve this impulse and maintain a type of balance in property ownership maintained by family patriarchs.

“Do not remove the ancient landmark, Nor enter the fields of the fatherless...”

-Proverbs 23:10

What is most interesting, and we will talk more about this later, is that, while our modern world is skeptical of capitalism, they lay at the feet of capitalism the sole blame for our current situation, not realizing that there is another, more nefarious force at work that has created the current problems. On the more socialistic wing of our politics, the concept of private ownership is seen to be bad, and is actively being discouraged. While this sounds noble in theory, it actually facilitates the same greedy habits that they are supposedly against, but at a more grandiose and destructive scale. After all, it was a socialist member of Denmark's parliament who, in 2016, wrote a now infamous article entitled: *“Welcome to 2030. I own nothing, have no privacy, and life has never been better.”*

This article was then reduced down to the more popular phrase: *“You will own nothing and be happy.”* The greedy capitalist might want to own more land for himself, but they don't want to abolish private property or capital altogether. However, there is a relationship, and this relationship has led to the current problems, as Chesterton shrewdly observes and predicts:

“I am well aware that the word "property" has been defied in our time by the corruption of the great capitalists. One would think, to hear people talk, that the Rothschilds and the Rockefellers were on the side of property. But obviously they are the enemies of property; because they are enemies of their own limitations. They do not want their own land; but other people's. When they remove their neighbor's landmark, they also remove their own....A man with the true poetry of possession wishes to see the wall where his garden meets Smith's garden; the hedge where his farm touches Brown's. He cannot see the shape of his own land unless he sees the edges of his neighbor's. It is the negation of property that the Duke of Sutherland should have all the farms in one estate; just as it would be the negation of marriage if he had all our wives in one harem.”

-Gk Chesterton - “What's Wrong With the World”

Charity

This leads neatly to the final benefit of property we will discuss in this paper, charity:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleanings from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the LORD your God.”

-Leviticus 23:22

A fact that most modern people don't know is that the Greek language had four primary words for "love" that were based on types of relationships. "Phileo" referred to brotherly love and was the love shared between friends, "eros" was "erotic" love that was shared between lovers, and "storge" was affectionate love that was shared between children and their parents. The highest and most utilized word in our New Testaments is "agape" which refers to divine love. It is this love that is unconditional, and this love that was uniquely offered to the "stranger", the person that we have no immediate relation with, or worldly call to care for this person. It is this high form of love that Christ is describing in His famous parable of the "good Samaritan", and this love that He famously fulfilled in His own crucifixion and resurrection.

In the old English, in order for Christians to recognize this special word when it was used, the old King James Bible would translate this word "charity", and from this word, the love that cares even for the stranger, and even for our enemies, we get the modern concept of "charity". As we can see in the above passage, this concept was drilled down into the people of God even through the harvesting process, and was applied through this concept of ownership. A land owner was expected to leave large sections of their field unharvested, at great personal cost to themselves, in order to provide sustenance for the stranger and for the impoverished.

But this charity was not done only to help those who were struggling, it was also a way for the people of God to "translate" their physical wealth into spiritual wealth:

“Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.”

-1 Timothy 6:17-19

This passage comes right after one of the most famous, and misquoted passages, within the Scriptures about money:

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

-1 Timothy 6:10

Most people, mistakenly, think that this passage actually says that “money is the root of all evil”, and therefore believe that the Bible is somehow against personal wealth. However, the warning here is not about possessions, but against greed, and even then, greed is only said to be at the root of “all kinds of evil”, but not “all evil”. This is not to diminish the sin of greed, but to help us further understand this principle. When Paul speaks to the wealthy, he doesn’t command them to give up their wealth, but to remember to live charitably, to be ready to give and to share with the poor.

But, in a way that is strange to the modern mindset, he doesn’t say that the rich are responsible for “eradicating” poverty, and he doesn’t even say how much they should give. Because the focus of his encouragement is actually not on the needs of the poor, but the soul of the one giving.

This point reinforces what we have been talking about. In order to grow in charity, one must have possessions to be charitable with. Someone who has no possessions, can’t learn how to be charitable. Again, even with children, a parent will give them a toy and then command them to share with other children. This lesson is being taught in this simple way, because it can’t be taught any other way.

This, again, is a point that we don’t fully understand today. The reason for this is that the bulk of charitable work done in our society is done by the state, through the taxes collected by the government. Taxes are certainly something that Christ has given the state the authority to collect:

“For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.”

-Romans 13:6-7

So the problem can’t be with taxes themselves, the problem is with the purpose of charity. The whole movement to state run charity happened through a call to socialistic policies in the late eighteenth century, and was done almost exclusively by more noble minded people who were trying to “fix the world”. They realized that reliance on private charity was slow moving and only got their programs so far. But, if only the state could be responsible for these things, then the wealth of those who had too much could be redistributed by the state to those who didn’t have enough.

The Search For Eden

“What has always made the state a hell on earth has been precisely that man has tried to make it his heaven.”

-Friedrich Hoelderlin - “Hyperion”

Though we began this paper talking about Eden and the purpose of personal property, what could easily be pointed out are the excesses and abuses of personal property, and the callousness that a pursuit of wealth and capital can produce at a societal level. As a result, it is easy for many people to imagine that far from being a part of paradise, private property must have been a part of the decline of human civilization. Whereas the actual Biblical teaching is that wealth and property are good, but the heart of man which was corrupted by the fall, can twist what was once good, into something that is bad.

However, as the elites in Europe became increasingly secular, they stopped believing in the Bible’s account of original sin, and had to create a myth of their own. For these elites, mankind was simply an evolved animal, with no more inherent worth or cosmic intent than that of an ape or an ox. As such, they thought that the more primitive man was, the closer he was to “Eden”, or as they put it the “state of nature”. In accordance with this idea, “original sin” was not man’s rebellion against God, but man’s pursuit of civilization and society, all beginning with private property:

“The first man, who, after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, “This is mine,” and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, how many wars, how many murders, how many misfortunes and horrors, would that man have saved the human species, who pulling up the stakes or filling up the ditches should have cried to his fellows: Be sure not to listen to this imposter; you are lost, if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong equally to us all, and the earth itself to nobody!”

-Jean Jacques Rousseau - “Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men”

While this idea was not unique to Rousseau, he was the first prominent thinker to articulate this ideology. For him, it was private property itself that constituted original sin, and the “noble savage” who was not stained by this mistake but maintained their integrity by keeping within the “state of nature”. While this idea is factually false, and philosophically ignorant, my purpose here is not to debunk Rousseau, but merely to show the evolution of his ideas and how they have permeated the modern west.

For Rousseau, the salvation of man was only possible by reverting to the state of nature, meaning that Rousseau was more of an anarchist than anything else, which is probably why his ideas never had the world changing effects that he wanted. Although I could argue that the myth of the “noble savage” and the desire to restore the world to the state of nature still exists in many circles to this day.

However, his ideas became far more popular when they were explained in an “eschatological” way by some of his French, socialist peers, leading to the French revolution, but most prominently when it was expanded on by his most famous student, Karl Marx. When I say “eschatological” I am referring to a Christian doctrine that concerns the “end times”. From our perspective, the way back to Eden is barred by human effort, and in a sense, the naked “innocence” of Eden can never be returned to. Instead, Christ has redeemed our fall and will reconstitute Eden, not in innocence, but in true righteousness for all those who believe in Him.

Rousseau’s instinct was to wipe away original sin and start human society over again in the state of nature, but his peers, who quite liked the trappings of modern convenience, had no real desire to do that. Instead, they began to theorize, like Christianity, that the “Eden” of innocence, the “Eden” of the savage could never be brought back, but an “Eden” of righteousness created by our wealth and technology could be created by our effort.

This is what most people miss about Karl Marx. At first Marx wasn’t intending to prescribe any political change, though he did later on, at first he was merely acting as a secular prophet, *predicting* how this new world would come about, how heaven could be produced on the earth. When his predictions took longer than he wanted, he began to actually *prescribe* revolution in documents like “The Communist Manifesto”. In this short, but dangerous document, Marx and his friend Friedrich Engels lay out their plan for how man could create this prophesied heaven on earth. Amongst their prescriptions they say this:

“The distinguishing feature of Communism is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property. But modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products that is based on class antagonisms, on the exploitation of the many by the few. In this sense, the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.”

-Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels - “The Communist Manifesto”

For Marx, one couldn't totally get rid of private property, but the property of the rich who, he believed, gained their wealth by oppressing the poor. This "stolen wealth" could be seized by the state and redistributed in their coming kingdom of righteousness upon the earth. For the various revolutionaries who took these ideas seriously, this led to the most brutal and bloody revolutions that the world has ever seen.

The Shepherd and the Hunter

In France, after the overthrow of the wealthy, they turned on the so-called "*bourgeois*", which refers, roughly, to the middle class. These people were thrown from their homes, persecuted, exiled, and in many cases, executed. This same basic process happened in Russia, Germany, and China. As a result of these revolutions, millions were executed, and millions more starved to death as a result of killing all the most useful people in their society. Because, though these intellectual revolutionaries touted themselves as experts in economic theory, most of them had never actually worked a real job or contributed to society in any meaningful way.

They were, themselves, rich elites who were educated in prestigious institutions. As such, they had no real way of knowing how an economy really grows and develops.

"So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents."

-Genesis 25:27

In the Bible, there are two primary, archetypal, careers, a hunter and shepherd. Esau finds his wealth and prosperity through his strength as a hunter, but Jacob finds his in his skill as a shepherd, and we know that Jacob's wealth exceeded that of Esau's. What's the difference? The hunter uses his skill to take possession of things that he has no ownership of, things that naturally dwell in nature. But the shepherd, like the farmer, actually takes ownership of his animals and literally "creates" new wealth by breeding the animals.

Another key difference has to do with the effect each of these careers have on those around them. While a hunter often would share their food, since they didn't have refrigerators to keep a fresh kill from spoiling, they couldn't actually stimulate any form of trade or commerce. Whereas the shepherd always had a source of "fresh meat" which allowed for more commerce amongst people and actual development of societal trade.

This is a loose, symbolic, picture of how an economy works. In order for someone to grow in wealth they can either use their skill to appropriate the resources that are readily

available, or they can use a different skill set to create new opportunities, products, and services to, almost literally, create wealth. To use a simple example, a “hunter” in our society might become a manager at an already existing, and thriving company, whereas a shepherd would either create a brand new company, or they would develop an existing company, expanding its scope and footprint.

The problem with the “hunter” is that their wealth is limited by the resources that are available. Meaning that, no matter how skillful a hunter might be, if there are no animals around him, he will starve. A shepherd doesn’t have that problem. He owns his own livestock and so he is mobile, but also he has the ability to create more, which also allows him to buy and trade with neighboring people. As such, when a hunter’s resources run dry, or they want more than what is available, they will have to steal what belongs to others. This is why the archetype of “hunter” is usually seen as broadly negative in most stories, think Gaston in “Beauty and the Beast”.

But since the hunter’s strategy is more obvious, the shepherds are usually seen in the same light. In other words, when a society sees a group of people prospering, even when conditions are bad for everyone else, the assumption is that they stole the property of others in order to enrich themselves. This exact thing happens to Jacob when working for his Uncle Laban:

“Now Jacob heard the words of Laban’s sons, saying, “Jacob has taken away all that was our father’s, and from what was our father’s he has acquired all this wealth.”
-Genesis 31:1

The sons of Laban couldn’t understand how someone who managed the flocks for their father could end up with *more* livestock than their father without being a thief. Later, Jacob explains:

“These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried their young, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. “That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it. You required it from my hand, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. “There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes.”
-Genesis 31:38-40

Jacob claims that his wealth was not stolen, but was gained through his hard work and ingenuity, and the Biblical authors count him as being honest. However, throughout human history, this is not how such individuals are viewed. Almost always, when the economy starts to turn sour, they are blamed for the economic ills, and they are the

ones who are most targeted during a social revolution. Since the Jews have had Jacob as one of their central figures of their faith, and because they have been a people without a homeland for so many centuries, they have commonly taken on the role of a “shepherd” wherever they go.

They facilitate a type of “mediating” role in the society, usually focusing on trade, which in turn enriches the community, but also themselves at a disproportionate level. This doesn’t mean that they are necessarily doing anything wrong, but when the economy turns, that is exactly what everyone starts to think. The economist Thomas Sowell put this point pretty well:

“Some observers have seen the resentments toward middleman minorities as being due to their prosperity, but truly wealthy people have seldom provoked the kind of rage and bitterness directed at middleman minorities, even in times and places where most middlemen were far from rich. It is not just what these minorities have achieved, but how they have achieved it, that evokes suspicions and resentments. Throughout most of the history of the human race, most people have made a living in agriculture—typically through arduous labor. The beginning of the industrial revolution meant, for most people, the transfer of the scene of that arduous labor from farm to factory. To such people, those who earned their livings without visible toil, with clean hands, and by simply selling things that others had produced at higher prices than the producers had charged, were ready targets of resentments, especially when these non-producers enjoyed a higher standard of living than those who worked in factories or on farms. It did not have to be a dramatically higher standard of living. Those nearby on the socioeconomic scale are often more hotly resented than distant rich people. Just as there are those who believe that only workers who handle tangible physical objects in the production process are “really” producing output, so they believe that middlemen who physically produce nothing are merely parasites who insert themselves gratuitously between the “real” producers and the consumers”

-Thomas Sowell - “Black Rednecks and White Liberals”

It was this type of “trade” that the socialists reviled as false labor that poisoned the economy, not understanding that this literally created the economy as they knew it. By targeting these people, they destroyed the economy and created some of the worst economic conditions the world has ever seen, leading to literally millions of people starving to death. While I don’t think this is the only cause, it is one of the primary causes of Jewish persecution throughout the last two thousand years, and it is one of the reasons why it is happening again in our current time. As the economy turns, the “middle men” of our culture, the Jews who have built up so many different “trading” facets of our economy, are to blame.

I recently rewatched Christopher Nolan's "The Dark Knight Rises", which is phenomenal by the way. This movie is loosely adapting Charles Dickens "The Tale of Two Cities" which is all about the French Revolution. In this movie, the wealthy elites, like Bruce Wayne, are targeted by an evil and vindictive villain named Bane, whose intent is to destroy the city. But in order to gain power, he convinces the poor that they are poor due to being exploited by the wealthy. He leads a revolution in which they murder the elites and steal all their assets, leading to a complete collapse of the city, making them completely reliant on "aid" from the US government. And he begins this revolution by targeting the stock market exchange.

Given that Hollywood made this movie, it is absolutely dumbfounding how pro-capitalist it is, all while showing the excesses of this system. Once again, I don't say all this to support capitalism, though I am inclined to agree with our founders that it is the least bad economic system available, it is instead to lay the groundwork for what leads us to theft, as well as a description of where our world is heading if we are motivated by resentment.

Coveting and Theft

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's."

-Exodus 20:17

The reason why the tenth commandment completes the commandments, is because it helps us understand the spiritual pre-requisites to all these sins. Theft, like the other sins, begins in the heart, in a state of greed and corruption. The mistake that most modern people make is to believe that greed is something that only the wealthy are capable of.

While it is true that the wealthy have a far less understandable motive for greed, since they have more than enough, the poor are equally susceptible to this sin. When politicians speak on behalf of "the people" and complain about the massive wealth disparity, it is so easy for us to see their speech as altruistic, instead of covetous. Because what they are actually talking about is not creating new wealth, but taking the wealth of another person.

And just because that person has “more than enough” doesn’t mean that they should be deprived of their own right to property. While the Bible is very clear that the wealthy are forbidden from shady business practices, like charging interest in a way that harms people:

You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. “You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. “If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; “and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless. “If you lend money to any of My people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him; you shall not charge him interest. “If you ever take your neighbor’s garment as a pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down. “For that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin. What will he sleep in? And it will be that when he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am gracious.”

-Exodus 22:21-27

But it also zealously protects the property of the Israelites, rich and poor alike:

“If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep. “If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed. “If the sun has risen on him, there shall be guilt for his bloodshed. He should make full restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. “If the theft is certainly found alive in his hand, whether it is an ox or donkey or sheep, he shall restore double. “If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed, and lets loose his animal, and it feeds in another man’s field, he shall make restitution from the best of his own field and the best of his own vineyard. “If fire breaks out and catches in thorns, so that stacked grain, standing grain, or the field is consumed, he who kindled the fire shall surely make restitution. “If a man delivers to his neighbor money or articles to keep, and it is stolen out of the man’s house, if the thief is found, he shall pay double. “If the thief is not found, then the master of the house shall be brought to the judges to see whether he has put his hand into his neighbor’s goods. “For any kind of trespass, whether it concerns an ox, a donkey, a sheep, or clothing, or for any kind of lost thing which another claims to be his, the cause of both parties shall come before the judges; and whomever the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbor.”

-Exodus 22:1-9

Once again, when a society turns from what is good, they turn to conspiratorial thinking. A true belief that the reason why we can’t get ahead, is because there is a parasitic element in the culture that is artificially holding us back. This type of thinking feeds our

covetousness, the belief that other people's wealth, in some way, belongs to us. This belief justifies theft in our hearts, whereas the law condemns theft in all forms, without consideration for the motive behind the theft, nor the moral status of the one being robbed. This is because, God wants us to learn responsibility and not to be governed by our resentments and greed:

"Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need."

-Ephesians 4:28

Notice that Paul says that labor itself is redeeming. And through labor, one can gain property that they can in turn "give him who has need." As always the Bible is more interested in our souls than our bodies. So even though wealth and poverty are not always as easy to reduce to good qualities and bad qualities as we might like, the main point is that, in general, hard work and wisdom breeds success, whereas laziness and foolishness lead to poverty:

"In all labor there is profit, But idle chatter leads only to poverty. The crown of the wise is their riches, But the foolishness of fools is folly."

Proverbs 14:23-24

Again, there are exceptions, but this is the general rule. But beyond everything else we need to remember that the purpose of Christ is not to remove the law, but to redeem the law in us. The problem with property is not the thing itself, but our fallen nature.

Ever since the original rebellion against God, beginning with Satan, and then continuing through human history, was perpetuated and added to by each act of disobedience committed by every single person throughout our history. This rebellion ended when, finally, there was a man born who never rebelled against God, but followed Him faithfully all of His life, this man being our Savior Jesus. By submitting ourselves to Him, His perfect obedience becomes ours, and our disobedience is judged through His death. This was the start of a new creation formed in His blood in which all those who would call on His name for salvation and follow Him could be set free from the consequences of our rebellion and return to Eden.

But we also believe that the return to Eden can only happen the same way that Christ returned to Eden, through our death. We don't have the ability to recreate Eden on this earth, only to call others to the same hope that we have received from Christ. It will only be through the return of Christ that this world will be set right and restored to its former

glory, our role is to wait and to live our lives in obedience to Him, producing as much of Eden as is humanly possible through our lives submitted to Him.

It was for this reason that most Christian thinkers throughout church history have seen private property as a means to honor God on this earth and return to our original intent:

“God and his reason commanded him to subdue the earth, i.e. improve it for the benefit of life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labour. He that in obedience to this command of God, subdued, tilled and sowed any part of it, thereby annexed to it something that was his property, which another had no title to, nor could without injury take from him.”

-John Locke - “The Second Treatise on Government”

Whatever personal property that God has entrusted us with, it is our responsibility to steward this property well. To tend and keep it in a way that honors God and benefits life. Within this category of property we also have to include cities, states, and nations. Just as an individual can own a bit of land, so can an entity like a business or a country. Therefore, just as an individual can honor God by stewarding his property in obedience to God, so can a nation steward our land to the glory of God and the benefit of the rest of creation.

However, the bulk of mankind, and even a good chunk of the believer’s heart, is still in rebellion against God. Therefore, private property can be used as a way to harm other people, to ostracize our fellow man, and injure them. Therefore, it isn’t the church’s job to condemn private property, nor to try to seize it from those we deem unworthy, but instead it is to learn to use our own property well, and to teach others to do the same.