

# Protection of Property and Reputation

*Series: Requirements for Humanity*

*by Steve Zeisler*

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Mark Twain once said, "When I was 18, I was convinced that my father didn't know anything. By the time I was 25 I was astonished to discover how much he had learned." Twain is describing the perspective of youths who sense their own potential and are sure the generation before them is ignorant of the way life is. What is usually added to the enthusiasm of the young person in the years between 18 and 25 is responsibility. By taking up responsibility and living with its consequences the young person realizes that his parents know more than he had previously thought.

If we are to mature, it is required that we accept responsibility and learn from it. These past few weeks we have been studying the Ten Commandments, and today will consider commandments eight and nine. They provide two great tests of whether or not we have taken responsibility and grown up as a result.

## *Two Tests of Maturity*

The eighth commandment is, "Do not steal." The ninth commandment has to do with honesty in our speech: "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor." The first of these centers on property rights, whether we have respect for what is owned by another, and whether we are, in fact, rightly related to the material things of this world. The second issue has to do with the importance of our own reputation and defending another's right to his reputation. In those things, proper relationship to material things and protection of reputation, our maturity is tested.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." The things we value the most are the things to which we attach our heart. The commandment that forbids stealing is the first step toward learning all of the biblical insight on the nature of property and wealth. In refusing to take that which is another's I must ask what is appropriate in the control of my property. How should I responsibly use it, invest it, care for it, and give it away?

Regarding honest speech, Jesus also said, "It is not what goes in the mouth, but what goes out that defiles a man." It is not what we eat (unclean food), it is what we say that will determine whether we are defiled. A great test of maturity is whether our speech is honest and honorable or whether it is manipulative, tricky, and self-centered. The apostle James said, "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well." The one who has learned to control what he says so that he serves rather than hurts his neighbor, is no longer a child in the things of God.

There are two sides to the eighth commandment regarding stealing: Do not interfere with another's right to control his own property, and do not become a thief that uses another's things. When the ninth commandment says, "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor," the concern is also two-sided. Do not deny the right of a neighbor to his own good name, and do not permit yourself to be diminished by becoming deceptive and therefore untrustworthy.

## *The Concern of Parents*

In parenting, these twin issues of proper relationship to material things and the importance of one's reputation are always a concern. We start telling our children at an early age to pick up their clothes and put away their toys. We want them to have a sense that they are responsible for their things. They should not take that which belongs to another, and they should not break things because of irresponsibility. When a child is given an allowance, or begins a job, we expect them to learn the skills of handling money, including saving and giving.

Likewise, parents are concerned about their child's reputation. We agonize when our children are excluded by their peers. We care if our kids have been slandered. The famous ditty, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me" has never been true. Names hurt us and are terribly destructive. We long for our children to have a reputation among their peers that is honorable. Earthly parents imitate their heavenly Father when they instruct their children in responsible use of property and the importance of character that has been forged honestly and honorably.

In Hebrew, the original notion of the eighth commandment was "Do not kidnap." That is stealing in its greatest form. If you were to kidnap someone, you would not only have stolen the person's goods, but their productivity, their hopes, and dreams. Over time the word expanded to mean not only kidnapping, but any form of stealing. It is right and proper to have material things that we control without interference, and I think that is one of the reasons for the tremendous upheaval in the communist world today. It is impossible to sustain the notion that the state should own everything because God intended for us to have property so that we can learn responsibility and mature as a result.

## *Wealth's Responsibilities*

However, we must be reminded that the Bible is filled with warnings about ownership of things. The scriptures are clear that God is concerned about the way we use the riches and property we are given. If we have refused to steal another's things, we must also be responsible with that which is our own. Jesus said, "You cannot serve two masters. You will hate one and love the other. You cannot serve God and riches." There is always the temptation to allow our property to take command of us. The apostle Paul wrote to his friend Timothy: "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God who richly supplies all things to enjoy." Although it seems to bring security, wealth is uncertain. It is a foolish goal and a cruel master. If we have property, we are required to use it responsibly.

### 1. Creativity

I want to suggest four responsible choices that come from the teaching of the scriptures. The first of these is: be creative. Adam was told by the Lord to cultivate the garden. The abundance was already there, the plants were already growing, and the trees were laden with fruit. In the command to Adam, cultivation had the idea of bringing about order and beauty in the garden by adding his creative touches to it. Our property remains an avenue for the creation of beauty and leaving our distinctive mark on God's world.

The housing tract where our family lives has homes which were all built with the same floor plan and square footage. It is interesting, however, to see the changes the owners have made in the 35 years those houses have been in existence. Our next door neighbors and the people across the street have

both recently finished remodeling their homes, and there is no evidence that the houses ever resembled each other. The two couples have different styles, tastes, different requirements for family, and they have adjusted these houses to make them look utterly different. The human desire to be creative is God-given and goes back to the very beginning of the race.

When I was younger, I worked at a Christian camp in Colorado one summer. My primary job was to wash dishes, which carried with it no sense of personal accomplishment. In contrast, another assignment was to help build a path from a patio to an aspen grove. I remember how much more satisfying it was to create an attractive path with the idea that people would enjoy walking down to the grove. The dishwashing had nowhere near the same level of satisfaction as work that created something worthwhile and attractive. God is honored by the creation of beauty offered to him.

## 2. Stewardship

The second—and most important—responsible choice we can make in regard to property is to recognize our role as stewards in the Lord's service. We never really own anything outright, despite our feelings of authority. God owns what we control and we are merely stewards. In both the Old and New Testament, the steward was a servant given responsibility for his master's goods. The master would say how he wanted his property attended to, and the steward was to act according to his master's wishes. The servant was to be faithful and was required to give an accounting to his master for what he had done with the goods. With this concept of our role, we must understand what our master wants done with the things we control and we need to recognize that we are accountable to him for the choices that we make.

When Leslie and I were newly married, David and Carolyn Roper (the pastor who married us, and his wife) asked us to stay in their home and take care of their son while they took a trip to New York City. We were instructed on watering the plants, caring for the house, and taking care of Joshua. It was not our house or child, but a stewardship that we were delighted to undertake. We never asked, "What do we want to do with these things? What do we think is a good idea for this child?" What we did was obey the instructions. If something came up in which we had not been instructed, the question we asked was "What would David and Carolyn want done?" We were stewards caring for the property of those people we loved, and we wanted to be faithful.

As Christians, we need to view "our property" that way. We can be creative, but we need to recognize that we are only stewards of what we have. In Luke 16, after Jesus told a parable about stewardship, he said, "If you have not been found faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon (that is, the riches of this world) who will give the true riches to you?" When we go before the Lord to have an accounting made, if we have not been faithful in the use of this world's goods, who will trust us with anything that lasts forever?

## 3. Generosity

A third choice we can make, regarding our resources, is to be generous and compassionate. Job said of himself:

**If I had kept the poor from their desire, or have caused the eye of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone and the orphan has not shared it...If I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or that the needy had no covering...if I lifted my hand against the orphan because I saw that I had support in the gate, let my shoulder fall from the**

**socket and my arm be broken off at the elbow. For calamity from God is a terror to me, and because of his majesty I can do nothing (Job 31:16-23).**

Speaking to his followers Jesus said, "You saw me naked and hungry and thirsty, and you ministered to me." And they said, 'When did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger, or naked?' and Jesus said, 'If you did it to these, even the least of them, then you did it to me.'" Time and again the word of God commands us to look for ways to be compassionate to people, care for people, and be generous with what we have. We are to outdo one another in generosity.

#### 4. Fairness

The last word I would raise in how to be responsible with our property is the word fairness. We can act so that justice is done, the rules are the same for everyone, and that financial benefit does not accrue too much to somebody while being unfairly lost by others. James says, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your misery is coming upon you... Behold the pay of the laborers who mowed your field and which has been withheld by you cries out against you and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You live luxuriously on the earth and live a life of wanton pleasure, you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter." The issue here is riches that were gained unjustly. The employer did not pay the people who worked for him. He used their labor, their effort, their creativity, and got rich by cheating them, and he will answer to the Lord. We must look for ways to assure that those who work hard benefit from their productivity. We should choose to use our wealth and influence to promote justice and fair treatment for everyone.

The commandment is "Do not steal." It points to a positive truth. Adam was told to oversee the Garden, to cultivate it. The children of Adam ever since have had dominion over the earth, property that is appropriate. The children of Israel were given an inheritance in the land where they went, land that would produce food. The scriptures teach that it is right for us to have goods that we may manage. It may well be required of us that we have them if we are to mature. A great test of maturity is whether we will learn to think with God about the things that are in our hands, to do what is right and godly with our goods.

One of the great tragedies of poverty, whether it is in this country or the Third World, is that it stunts the growth of the individual. It not only produces physical deprivation, but it does not allow for the kind of growth that people who have assets take for granted.

One of the reasons I appreciate men like Eli Fangidae in Indonesia, or John Perkins in this country, is that they do more than help the poor get material goods. These men raise capital and confidence so that the poor can have a plot of land or a shop to manage in order to exercise responsibility and therefore become mature.

#### *Don't Bear False Witness*

The second commandment that we are discussing forbids lying, "Don't bear false witness against your neighbor." An individual's character and reputation may be the most important possession of all. We must be truth-tellers in order to protect the good name of our neighbor and to gain standing as persons of integrity ourselves.

I would like us to consider the teaching of Psalm 15 in regards to a person's integrity:

**O Lord, who may abide in Thy tent? Who may dwell on Thy holy hill? He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, and speaks truth in his heart. He does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend; in whose eyes a reprobate is despised, but who honors those who fear the Lord; he swears to his own hurt, and does not change; he does not put out his money at interest, nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.**

Who will be at home in the presence of God (v.1)? It is the person of integrity, the man or woman who is first of all honest in their heart, and honest in the course of their life. Perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker, "Be sincere, whether you mean it or not." The person who goes by that maxim uses honesty as a ploy. In contrast, the person described in Psalm 15 is one who is honest from the heart, and will not change. He has convictions that he holds to.

### *Always Honest*

We are told here that the reprobate should be despised and the righteous man should be honored. At times I find that difficult because many righteous people are embarrassing to me, and I would rather not associate with them or honor them. They are kind of foolish looking and do not seem to be up with the times. On the other hand, there are attractive and successful reprobates of whom we might think highly. The man described in the Psalm is a man of conviction who does not change when it is convenient, does not treat people differently in different circumstances, and whose convictions always inform his thinking. When it says, "He swears to his own hurt and does not change," it means that if he makes a statement that might later hurt him by being expensive, difficult, or embarrassing, he will not change regardless of the consequences. Who can dwell in the presence of God? It is the man or woman of honesty who is trustworthy, whose character and reputation cannot be questioned.

There is a wonderful testimony that David gives at the end of this Psalm: "Such a one will never be shaken." This is the kind of person that cannot be knocked off balance. Are we people of integrity? The command is simple, "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor." I do not tell categorical lies so much as I manage the truth, manipulating it by being quiet. If someone gave me credit for something I did not deserve, I am apt to leave their misinformation unchallenged. I can deny the truth by innuendo without actively being dishonest. I think many of us escape blame or difficulty by allowing it to descend on someone else who does not deserve it, by not actively intervening and accepting responsibility for it. Inevitably, our character is reduced when we act that way.

The commandments are to use property responsibly in the first case, and to use honest speech responsibly in the second. These requirements will measure genuine maturity more reliably than age, or worldly status.

### *Sophisticated and Immature*

We live in a world that is sophisticated but immature in these matters. Most of us do not associate with purse-snatchers or embezzlers. However, theft and dishonesty are widespread among the socially prominent; whether it is insider trading on Wall Street, government officials who make dishonest deals with savings and loans operators for campaign contributions, or courts of law in which those who can

afford to hire tricky lawyers do better than those who are too poor to afford them. We live in a world that is sophisticated in its ability to take what does not belong to it by twisting the truth. Those who claim to speak for the Lord are no better. There is great tragedy in the public ruination of Christian leaders who are greedy and dishonest. Whether it is business, government, law, religion, or education, people of prominence in our culture are often dishonest and greedy, sophisticated but immature. They do not have the kind of stature that God intended, but refuse what God values and insist on having what they can manipulate for themselves. Yet these ancient commands of God do not go away. They offer a beacon to us, saying, "Would you grow up, would you be a woman of standing and stature? Would you be a man of responsibility and maturity? Would you be someone who is worthy of the name of Christ?"

What will you do with your property? Will you use it creatively, as a steward, generously, and fairly? Will you be the kind of person who honors the reputation of another and insists that your own reputation be pure and filled with integrity?

### *"I Am the Truth"*

One of the names Jesus gave to himself was Truth. He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." If we would be like him, we must be true ourselves. He said about his enemy, Satan: "He is a liar, and the father of lies." At the heart of what it is to be satanic is to be dishonest. Our Lord is the truth; our enemy is the liar.

To conclude let us read Psalm 12; a prayer of longing in a world that is difficult:

**Help, Lord, for the godly man ceases to be, for the faithful disappear from among the sons of men. They speak falsehood to one another; with flattering lips and with a double heart they speak. May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, the tongue that speaks great things; who have said, "With our tongue we will prevail; our lips are our own; who is lord over us?" Because of the devastation of the afflicted, because of the groaning of the needy, now I will arise," says the Lord; "I will set him in the safety for which he longs."**

**The words of the Lord are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times. Thou, O Lord, wilt keep them; Thou wilt preserve him from this generation forever. The wicked strut about on every side, when vileness is exalted among the sons of men.**

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