

**• The Seventh Commandment**

• Adultery was not a private matter – punishable by execution

• Immorality a different crime

• Sexual relationship with a slave girl regarded as normal

• Polygamy

• Concubinage

• Involvement with a prostitute

• The Mosaic law considerably inferior to life in the Spirit

• Adultery judged so seriously because the law protected the family

**• The Eighth Commandment**

• Sanctity of property

The **seventh command**, originally, in ancient Israel, forbade a sexual relationship between a man and a married woman within the community of Israel. (Marriages with foreign women were forbidden altogether<sup>1</sup>.) Leviticus 18:20, 20:10, Numbers 5:11–15, Deuteronomy 5:18 and 22:22–24 refer to the same crime. Leviticus 18:20 describes it as ‘defilement’ of the land and includes in it a number of sexual offences. Any who commit such things are to be cut off from among their people<sup>2</sup>. ‘Cutting off’ in this verse seems to refer to exclusion from Israel by means of execution. Both the man and the woman are to be executed for such a crime by their being stoned to death<sup>3</sup><sup>4</sup>. The law treated a betrothed woman as a married woman for the purpose of this ruling<sup>5</sup>. Adultery was a crime requiring action by the community. It was not simply a private matter.

A sexual relationship with a single girl was a different crime<sup>1</sup>. The punishment for adultery was death; the penalty for immorality with a single girl was compulsory marriage without the possibility of divorce!

A sexual relationship with an unmarried slave-girl was taken for granted as normal; she was a kind of second-class wife for the slave-owner or his son. Judging from the story of Ruth widows were in a similarly vulnerable position<sup>1</sup><sup>2</sup><sup>3</sup>. Polygamy – having more than one wife – was not against the Mosaic law. Nor was concubinage – having a female slave who was sexually available, but who was not fully a wife. Both the wife and the concubine had legal rights.

A concubine was not executed if she was found guilty of sexual liaison with a man other than her recognised partner. Her position was such that less loyalty was expected from her towards her husband<sup>1</sup>. The guilty couple in this case were scourged.

Adultery was regarded as a very serious crime, so serious it was punished by death. It was worse than involvement with a prostitute (which the law did not forbid!) Much of this might surprise and horrify a Christian, but this is itself a reminder that the Mosaic law was considerably inferior to life in the Holy Spirit. The seventh commandment did not originally refer to everything that a modern Christian rightly considers to be immorality.

The wisdom literature went further than the law in insisting on a much fuller sexual purity. In Proverbs all marital infidelity is rebuked<sup>1</sup>, yet still the adulteress is judged more severely than the harlot. ‘A harlot seeks only for a loaf of bread, but another man’s wife stalks a priceless soul’<sup>2</sup>. Adultery is a devouring fire<sup>3</sup>, and leads to ruin<sup>4</sup>.

Why is adultery judged more severely than other similar sexual sins? Why does it attract the death penalty? The answer surely is that the Israelite law protected the family. Adultery was considered worse than other forms of immorality because it broke up another man’s family. Adultery was placed on a level with murder; it has a murderous affect on the life of the family and therefore on the life of the nation. The family often owns property and cares for children. When the family-life of a nation is unstable the nation is unstable. The stability of Israel was important to God. He wanted the Israelites to ‘live long in the land’. The death penalty for adultery protected the family in a powerful manner. The New Testament goes further than the Mosaic law in its requirement of sexual purity.

The **eighth command** brings us to the sanctity of property, the sanctity of private ownership. It says: ‘You shall not steal’<sup>1</sup><sup>2</sup>. Whereas the command concerning adultery forbade theft of a man’s wife, the command concerning stealing forbids theft of a man’s property. In ancient Israel the kinds of theft most mentioned are (i) the stealing of domestic animals<sup>3</sup>, (ii) the forcible entry into a house or sheepfold<sup>4</sup>, (iii) robbery<sup>5</sup>. There is no reason to agree with those who think that the command originally concerned kidnapping. ‘Kidnapping’ (unlike the kind of theft envisaged in the eighth command) was subject to the death penalty.

<sup>1</sup> Deut 7:3-4

<sup>2</sup> Lev 18:29

<sup>3</sup> Lev 20:10

<sup>4</sup> Deut

22:22,24

<sup>5</sup> Deut 22:24

<sup>1</sup> Deut 22:28

<sup>1</sup> Ruth 2:8-9

<sup>2</sup> Ruth 2:22

<sup>3</sup> Ruth 3:10

<sup>1</sup> Lev 19:20

<sup>1</sup> Prov 5:1-23

<sup>2</sup> Prov 6:26

<sup>3</sup> Prov 6:20-35

<sup>4</sup> Prov 7:1-27

<sup>1</sup> 20:15

<sup>2</sup> Deut 5:19

<sup>3</sup> 22:1-4

<sup>4</sup> 22:2-3

<sup>5</sup> Lev 5:21-26

• *Punishment involved restoration or compensation but never death*

• *Money paid to the victim*

• *Sometimes some sympathy for the thief – although still punished*

• *No mutilation*

• *The basic moral demand continues for life in the Spirit*

The breaking of the eighth commandment never involved the death penalty unless some other crime was also involved. In this respect Israel differed from surrounding nations in the ancient world. In other nations serious theft brought upon the criminal the death penalty. But in Israel, the punishment of theft involved restoration and compensation<sup>□1</sup> or the thief might be sold as a slave<sup>□2</sup>. Theft was punished by the thief having to restore the property so that the person robbed was in the position he was in before. The theft of an animal was punished by the thief having to restore its value. In the case of an ox or sheep the value had to be given fourfold or fivefold<sup>□3</sup>. If the animal was recovered the penalty was to pay double its value<sup>□4</sup>. The money was not a fine paid to the state; it was compensation paid to the victim.

The thief was not to be executed, and sometimes the Old Testament even shows some sympathy for him. ‘People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving’, says Proverbs 6:30. Yet even the starving thief is warned. ‘Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it costs him all the wealth of his house’<sup>□1</sup>.

Penalties concerning theft did not involve mutilation (one thinks of Islamic law which in this matter is more severe). And it did not vary penalties according to the social status of the injured party, or of the criminal. The basic exhortation reappears in the gospel. The law condemns stealing; so does the gospel. There is an overlap of demand. The deepest requirements of the law are satisfied when the Christian obeys the Spirit.

‘Do not take money by force’ said John the Baptist to soldiers who asked his advice<sup>□1</sup>. ‘You who preach against stealing, do you steal?’ asked Paul<sup>□2</sup>, obviously regarding theft as plainly wicked. ‘Teach slaves . . . not to steal. . .’, Paul said to Titus<sup>□3</sup>. ‘Let none of you suffer as a thief’, said Peter<sup>□4</sup>. Obviously the basic moral demand of the eighth commandment continues. Yet at no point do the apostolic writers after the Day of Pentecost specially draw attention to the eighth commandment. When condemning theft they do not say ‘As Moses said...’ or ‘Do not steal and so keep the law of God’. That kind of specific placing of the Christian under the Mosaic law is something that they generally do not do. Ephesians 6:1–2 is virtually the only example and it is following up Ephesians 5:18! Life in the Spirit fulfils the law. The nearest the apostolic writers come to placing the Christian under the law is when – in certain areas covered by the Ten Commandments – they say virtually the same thing as the one of the Ten Commandments but apply it differently.

□1 22:1  
□2 22:3

□3 22:1  
□4 22:4

□1 Prov 6:31

□1 Luke 3:14  
□2 Rom 2:21  
□3 Titus 2:10  
□4 1 Pet 4:15

		<p><b>Dr Michael Eaton</b> is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)</i> books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p>	
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