

What Belongs to You?

BY DANILIE C. HILERIO-VILLANUEVA

For use with Lesson Seven of the 2019–2020 PW/Horizons Bible study, *Love Carved in Stone: A Fresh Look at the Ten Commandments* by Eugenia Anne Gamble



Scripture: Exodus 20:15; Matthew 25:31–46

Lesson Seven invites us to consider the concept of stealing. As with the previous Words, Eugenia explores many shades and nuances of the concept. Her examples range from government and corporate fraud to stocking up on office supplies for home use or arranging a stock portfolio. We engage in stealing practices that hurt our churches and communities, and that have global implications. Whether we steal by keeping silent, being indifferent to others' suffering, denying others' ability to meet their needs or disregarding people's time, we often fail to live according to the Eighth Word.

The Eighth Word also leads us to reflect on stewardship. As we execute ownership and possession, we are reminded that we don't own much, as Timothy 6:7 states, "for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it." Everything belongs to God. We are certainly called to execute good stewardship of everything God left in our care, of everything we have. Paul says, in Timothy 6:8, "[I]f we have food and clothing, we will be content with these." As we contemplate the abundance of creation, the plenty around us, we must reflect on who has their needs met and who doesn't. These needs include things we can't count, such as love, kindness and peace, as well as those things we can count and quantify, including pay, safe and accessible housing, education and quality health services.

From the Yiddish *ganab*, we come to our translation of *steal*. This word refers to "taking" in a sneaky and disguised way. Not as in stealing bread to survive,

but stealing bread knowing the taking will leave others hungry. Of course, we are not trying to justify the action of stealing, but rather question the object taken and need to do so. As Eugenia says, "The Eighth Word is given as an action without a specific object" (80). As we walk in our communities, sharing gifts of justice and testimony of Christ, we are called to fill in this blank throughout our lives. What are we stealing? What cannot be restored or ensured for future generations. Clean air? Clean water?

When we linger on the Eighth Word, we also come to consider systems that maintain advantage for some and disadvantage for others. What do our country's systems keep from certain groups? This means not just our next-door neighbors, or those who visit the food pantry every Thursday, but whole communities (or countries) that have been stripped of their natural resources, their land and left with nothing.* As Eugenia notes, "Passive inaction in the presence of economic hardship is theft" (81).

We are faced with tough decisions given our sinful nature. We consider gleaning and sharing as charity, losing sight that God called us to live in a bountiful community. There is enough for everyone to live on in a world where no one has to steal.

God has called us to stewardship, but we have executed ownership. We control time, talents and treasure as if we created them and own them. As Presbyterian Women, we may learn to determine the agenda, lay out the information and distribute the resources, but we must always remember that

the prophet was voiceless, wisdom goes unspoken and our Savior was penniless. We need to evaluate how and what we own.

As we treasure life, we see the face of Christ in those in need and we respond with generosity from what we have, not what it is left. As Presbyterian women, this generosity embodies our Purpose's commitments to work for justice and peace, and to build an inclusive, caring community of women that strengthens the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and witnesses to the promise of God's kingdom.

The Eighth Word is intended for us to foster respect among our community. The respect we must have for our neighbor is a moral response to the gift of creation and the life with which we have been blessed.

Questions

1. Consider the Eighth Word in daily practice and its short-term and long-term implications. Fill in the blanks as led by your heart.

You shall not steal _____.

You shall not steal _____.

You shall not steal _____.

You shall not steal _____.

You shall not steal _____.

2. On page 80, Eugenia says, "Punishment for stealing always includes restitution and restoration." Do we engage in theft that doesn't allow for restitution or restoration? Does depleting the earth's resources qualify as stealing from future generations? What else cannot be restored? Explain.
3. As Eugenia notes, the Eighth Word is all about "creating an environment of dignity for all" (83). What concrete actions can you do to create such an environment?
4. In the Opening Prayer, Eugenia prays "so that we may learn to give rather than take" (79). In closing the lesson, she states "This Word invites us to ask ourselves in our daily lives what we give to the world instead of what we take from it" (84). Consider, on a justice scale, what we give and what we take.



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Notes

* Learn more in Eduardo Galeano's *Las Venas Abiertas de América Latina* (Mexico, DF: Siglo 21 Editores); *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review, 1997); and *Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper, 2015).

Truth Be Told

BY DANILIE C. HILERIO-VILLANUEVA

For use with Lesson Eight of the 2019–2020 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Love Carved in Stone: A Fresh Look at the Ten Commandments* by Eugenia Anne Gamble



Scripture: Exodus 20:16, Deuteronomy 5:20 and Matthew 12:36–37

As we approach the end of our study, we reflect on how to build close, trusting relationships with God and our community. Exodus 20:16 tells us we should not bear false witness against one another. Put another way, the Ninth Word of Love emphasizes the need for honesty in our relationship with God and others.

Eugenia offers a comparison between the Hebrew phrases in Exodus 20:16—*eid sheker*, to refrain from giving “wrongfully injurious” words or witness—and in Deuteronomy 5:20—*eid shav*, to refrain from vain, deceptive speech meant to misrepresent oneself. The first phrase, *eid sheker*, connects to the other eight Words we have been studying, as it calls us to lead truthfully in word and deed, and refrain from misrepresenting others.

In disregarding the Ninth Word, we create the wound of betrayal and erode personal and institutional trust. It is difficult to distinguish the truth, but this is not just a condition of modern life. In John 18, as Pontius Pilate questions Jesus on charges of blasphemy, Jesus says he came into the world to testify to the truth. Pilate answers, perhaps dismissively, “What is truth?” (v. 38).

It is difficult to defend ourselves against a lie well crafted. As Eugenia Gamble points out through her childhood memories, a lie presented through a reliable source based on insider or impressive credentials—such as language, gender, rank, age or other traits—is considered automatically trustworthy and authoritative. It is also not a condition solely of modern life that people abuse this trust to deceive others.

As people of faith, what we can know for certain is that God wants us in community. As we envision how we will create that community, we should suspend unthinking belief in those who say they have the single, authoritative answer. With ever-more accessible and available communications outlets, our conception of the world has rapidly changed in the last century. Consider the rich phrasing and meaning you hear in different dialects of English, Spanish or your native language(s). Today, we hear a variety of voices and interpretations in history, psychology, economics and even theology. In addition to systematic theology, we benefit from considering scripture through the lenses of Black, Asian and postcolonial theologies, among others. There is not just feminist theology, but also womanist theology, *mujerista* theology and Asian American women’s theology. If we set aside notions of “the standard,” other voices allow us to see more of the truth.

As neighbors in a post-everything world—postmodern, postcolonial, post-Christian, post-technological, postliterate, postfactual—we have seen statistics twisted and turned, “facts” proven false, and falsehoods touted as truth. We have learned to be cautious about the latest superfood or miracle cure. In a sense, we don’t even trust ourselves. We know we are biased and rely on preconceptions. We like to rely on patterns. We arrange our desks, cabinets, refrigerators, drawers and desktops in a certain way, thinking that it would make it easier for us to complete our tasks and to find our stuff. Similarly, we build patterns for other people, and try to group people according to traits, location, education, gender, ethnicity, and other codifications our mind constructs. Yet, scissors still go missing and people are more complicated than the

labels we assign them. We are called to know one another, as we know ourselves. We are called to listen to each other's truths and to share our own. We are called to genuine and truthful relationships.

The Ninth Word is a love letter, an invitation to get know others and to be genuine. It is a call to speak out of our hearts with love, not hatred. This Ninth Word was intended to protect the voiceless and the poor, or, as Eugenia Gambles says, "Those who have no recourse or ability to negotiate the power structures, especially, widows, orphans, and immigrants" (92). As we read the paper or watch the news, we recognize power dynamics that render some people voiceless. Even if their voices are heard, their words are drowned by the authoritative testimony of those with power and resources. The poor are voiceless and

wander without food, water, or shelter, much as Jesus did, while false testimony is constructed. The truth is that there is space to know our neighbor and construct a genuine testimony of love and understanding among one another.

Being trustworthy is a tough task. And yet, as followers of Christ, we are called to live a life that honors truth. Even when testimony against him was overwhelming, Jesus did not build up a case, as the masses would have liked, toward Zacchaeus or the nameless Woman. We know that Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

Let's mindfully engage and live in the truth—no active or passive lie, omission, alternative reality. Just simple, truthful living. Are you up to the challenge?

Questions

1. Sit down with your Presbyterian Women group to watch or read the news. Discuss what you hear or read that you consider false testimony. What is the truth, particularly in light of the definition of truth that Eugenia offers in this lesson? How are we to be truthful? How can we engage in truthful dialogue? Explain.
2. Define in your own words an active and passive lie. Consider the ways we actively and passively establish false testimony.
3. Describe a current alternative reality or a once-upon-a-lifetime moment that you might remember. Why do we lie to ourselves? Explain.

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