

YOU SHALL NOT STEAL

Exod 20:15

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I want to thank Bill Trail for the work he does in recording and reproducing my sermons. Of course, why anyone would want an audio copy of my sermons is a great mystery to Bill; but, nevertheless, he does an excellent job in spite of the material he must work with. Thanks, Bill!

Friday, I suggested to Bill that we pull a prank on those who request a copy of today's sermon. Since the subject of our study is "You shall not steal," I thought it would be funny to give out empty CD cases. That way, when the case is opened, the first thing that will pop into the mind of the person is, "Hey! Who took my CD?"

"You shall not steal." Let's look at the eighth commandment, within the context of the Ten Commandments, as recorded in Exodus chapter 20, beginning at verse 1:

Then God spoke all of these words saying: "I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. **You shall have no other gods in My presence**" (20:1-3).

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down in worship to them nor shall you serve them, because I, Yahweh your God, am El Qanna [a jealous God], punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but lavishing loyal-love to a thousand [generations] of those who love Me and obey My commandments" (20:4-6)

"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh your God, for Yahweh will not let you go unpunished if you make wrongful use of His name" (20:7).

"Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your livestock, or the alien resident who is within your settlements. For in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath Day and made it holy" (20:8-11).

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you” (20:12).

“You shall not kill” (20:13).

“You shall not commit adultery” (20:14).

“You shall not steal” (20:15).

On the face of it, the eighth commandment concerns respect for the property of others. It does not delve into the ideology or the implications of the private ownership of property, as, for example, Karl Marx did. It simply says (pardon my grammar), “Don’t take what don’t belong to you.”

We are aware of theft, burglary, and larceny. We even distinguish between “grand larceny” and “petty larceny.” “Grand larceny” is when you take what is mine. “Petty larceny” is when I take what is yours. Or so it seems. Somehow, my stealing from you never seems as bad to me as your stealing from me.

We have become increasingly aware of white-collar crime on a corporate level: fraud, false accounting reports, and embezzlement. One word sums up such massive misappropriation of money and property: Enron.

Furthermore, we must take care that our interpretation of the eighth commandment is not limited to a defense of private property and the status quo, which defense is then used as a justification for the unjust distribution of goods. The terrible inequity between the “haves” and the “have nots” in our own society, as well as many other societies throughout the world, means that babies born into dire poverty are at the outset denied any realistic chance of surviving in a market economy. Very often, such individuals are robbed of their future. They are not robbed by “bad people”; they are robbed by power arrangements and political structures that have long since relegated them to the permanent underclass. Similar theft takes place between developed and developing nations when a long-term pattern of dependency is fostered. Too often, Third World countries have been treated only as colonies, natural resources, or markets, kept in a dependency relation so that nearly all benefits of the relation go to the developed economy and its colonial agents. In the face of such inequity and injustice, the eighth commandment proclaims: “You must not steal.”

And what about American capitalism? Although the eighth commandment espouses neither capitalism nor communism, it does have something to say to a society that

bombards its citizens with advertising and marketing strategies that are intrusive, irritating, and unrealistic. It does have something to say to a society that bids its citizens to become consumers with insatiable appetites. “You must not steal” most certainly has something to say to the economics of a society whose motto is: “*Caveat emptor!* Let the buyer beware!”

I am rich. Oh yes, it would be easy for me to point to those far richer and thereby to make myself look poor. But the truth is, I am rich. As a preacher, I seek to better you spiritually and in so doing you better me materially. In the sarcastic wit of Ambrose Bierce, a “clergyman” is “a man who undertakes the management of our spiritual affairs as a method of bettering his temporal ones.” I am rich. And it is not because I deserve it, and it is not because I have earned it. I am rich because I am lucky—lucky to have been born at the right time, in the right place, to the right parents. As much as I might wish to brag about my money management and financial frugality, the truth is I had a wonderful start for my life in this country—a start that the majority of this world never had and will never know. *So then, as a Christian, how am I to live in a world where a little have a lot and a lot have little?*

First, we must think differently than our consumer-driven culture thinks. If my worth, my image, and my very life are determined by what I have, rather than by what I am, no puny command against stealing will stop the raging of my lust for things. Loving others as Jesus loves us means that we value others as Jesus values us. It means we see others through the eyes of Jesus—the One who loved us *because we are sinners* and are, therefore, helpless and hopeless without that love. We are loved not because we are lovely, but because God is loving. Whenever we judge someone on the basis of their possessions or lack of possessions, we rob them of their dignity and worth in the eyes of God, and we become materialistic thieves who cannot see what is really valuable.

Second, we must realize that the eighth commandment does far more than protect property; it warns against taking advantage of anyone in need—it stands against all exploitation of the powerless and poor. Martin Luther heard in this commandment a sharp attack on economic and social injustice. His insights have much in common with the Old Testament prophets. The commandment against stealing is more than a guarantee of the inviolability of private property; it is an announcement that all societies

need a basic reordering so that the conditions for stealing are not so evident. Such a reordering was needed in ancient Israel, and surely is needed in the modern United States.

Third, we must use our material goods for the well-being of others. Ultimately we own nothing; it all belongs to God. There are no U-Haul trailers behind hearses; and if there were, we would all laugh. Everything belongs to God and He has entrusted us with blessings that He fully expects us to share with others. Any possession we may have is possession that is in service to a wider good. In the words of the Apostle Paul,

Those who have been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need (Eph 4:28, TNIV).

The rationale for honest labor rather than thievery is refreshing. It is not because property is private, but rather so as “to have something to share with the needy.” A similar thought is expressed in one of our hymns written by William W. How (1858).

We give Thee but Thine own,
Whate'er the gift may be;
All that we have is Thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from Thee.

May we Thy bounties thus
As stewards true receive,
And gladly, as Thou blessest us,
To Thee our first-fruits give.

And we believe Thy Word,
Tho' dim our faith may be,
Whate'er for Thine we do, O Lord,
We do it unto Thee.

We come, now, to what is sometimes my least favorite part of our worship service—the Contribution or the Offering. Perhaps some of you are thinking, “Yeah, Royce! Preach it, brother! I don’t care much for this part of worship either. Churches, nowadays, are too wrapped up in money. Money, money, money—that’s all I hear from religious organizations, whether on the radio or TV or stuff in the mail. All this begging for money—it really gets on my nerves.” Well, before you cheer, you should hear me out, because you may decide to boo instead.

Why is the time for giving sometimes less than inspirational for me? It’s because too often we act like we don’t know what to do with this part of the worship. Too often, we treat giving like a necessary evil that must be done, as a matter of convenience, when we

are all gathered together. Yes, I realize that we have good intentions, but I don't like it when we act ashamed or embarrassed, and apologize to our visitors as if to say: "Sorry, but bear with us a few minutes while we take care of some necessary family business." Sometimes, we even tell visitors *not* to give.

I do *not* believe in begging or arm-twisting, and I *do* believe that God loves a cheerful giver. My point is I fear that in an effort to be polite—and I believe in being polite—we fail to emphasize the necessity of giving. Our giving must be voluntary; it must not be forced or done grudgingly. However, *giving voluntarily is not voluntary*. Failure to give is robbery of God. It was God Himself who, through the prophet Malachi, uttered to Israel these stinging words:

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! (Mal 3:8, NRSV).

In just a moment, we will take up the contribution. You should give *only* if you feel compelled to give. Yes, compelled. Compelled not by guilt, but by gratitude. Compelled not by duty, but by love. And if you are visiting with us, feel free to give all you want. Giving is not simply an opportunity to give back to God a little of what He has given to us, it is also an opportunity to imitate God who has given so much to us. Few things are as god-like as glad, generous giving to share blessings with others.

Giving is a time of celebration and thanksgiving. Nothing would please me more than for visitors to leave our worship saying, "Wow! Those folks love to give! In fact, they told their long-winded preacher to shut-up, sit down, and pass the plate!" . . . And that's exactly what I'm going to do.

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