

You Shall Not Steal

TEXT: Ex 20:15

Words for kids:

PHBF 11.04.12

Scr. Reading: Exodus 20:1-15

Walking Straight: Exodus, part 2

[Quote SOS verses with congregation]

It's ironic to me that this sermon on stealing comes just two days before our country elects another President. The only day more ironic might have been April 15.

My own experiences with theft: completely surprised when our left-behind camera was turned in at Castlewood Canyon; our house burglarized shortly after New Year's 2010; a friend whose house was robbed *right* after Christmas, minus the Grinch movie left under his tree

Why is stealing wrong?

The prohibition against stealing assumes the right to private property. If the Bible supported socialism or communism, there could be no such thing as stealing since you can't steal what you already own, and no one can steal from you because they own it all, too. But the Bible teaches that stealing is both possible and wrong; therefore, we conclude that private property is a biblical value. But why?

The Bible teaches that God is the ultimate owner of all things:

Psalm 50:10-12 ¹⁰ For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹ I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. ¹² "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.

Human ownership of private property is thus a small reflection of His Ownership. This is the point of the dedication of the firstborn and the Feast of Firstfruits—acknowledging that everything comes from God:

Exodus 22:29-31 "You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. ³⁰ You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me. ³¹ "You shall be consecrated to me.

The *first* word about all property is that it belongs to God, and the private property we "own," we receive from Him who owns everything.

Technically, even when He gives us something, we merely become managers of His resources, not owners in our own right. The NT calls us "stewards" (1 Pt 4:10).

Clearly, then, no one has *right* to own anything except by God's gracious distribution. He is the owner, and it is His prerogative to bestow ownership upon whomever He wishes.

1 Corinthians 4:7 For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

This is the biblical foundation for why stealing is wrong: because God is the owner and distributor of all we have. Stealing, therefore, is an *indirect* attack upon God's *ownership* of all things and a *direct* attack on His *distribution* of certain things to certain people. In effect, stealing says to God, "I do not respect your authority as the Owner of all things, and I do not appreciate your wisdom as the Distributor of these things." Stealing is wrong because it's an attack on God.

But there's a second reason: stealing is wrong because it's an attack on human life. In an agrarian culture like Israel's, luxury items were *literally* a luxury. They didn't own much that didn't contribute directly to sustaining their life. Notice some of the specific case laws that grew out of this commandment:

Exodus 22:9 For every breach of trust, whether it is for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, or for any kind of lost thing, of which one says, 'This is it,' the case of both parties shall come before God. The one whom God condemns shall pay double to his neighbor. (cf. vv 1-15)

Nothing here about nonessentials like iPods or a third wagon out behind the barn. Animals were for production and food. Likewise with land and tools. These and most of their other possessions would have been their means of personal economic support. Stealing from someone in this situation threatened, not just their property, but their very life. Without animals or tools, they wouldn't be able to produce food or support their family or sustain their life. Thus, the prohibition against stealing is a protection of human life, not merely personal property rights.

Why is stealing wrong? Because it's an attack on God as owner and distributor, and it's an attack on human life and wellbeing.

What exactly is stealing?

The obvious forms of stealing:

- Stealing livestock (Ex 22:1,4)
- Breaking and entering (Ex 22:2-3, 7-8)

The more severe forms:

- Kidnapping (Ex 21:16, Dt 24:7)
- Taking an item devoted to God (Joshua 7:11)

Definition: Any action or inaction that deprives another person of something he/she has a right to.

There's embezzlement, extortion, racketeering, shoplifting, pickpocketing, pilfering, deliberate bankruptcy, insurance fraud, and identity theft. Those are the easy ones. But there's also:

- Falsifying time sheets (robbing our employer of pay for time we've not worked)
- Digital copyright theft (securing songs, movies, software, other media we've not purchased)
- Tax fraud (falsifying reports and numbers on our taxes)
- Overpricing (giving less value for the money, the modern equivalent of using an unjust weight)
- Deficit spending (stealing from future generations)
- Deliberate bankruptcy & credit default (intentionally borrowing with no intent to repay)
- Plagiarism (using someone else's ideas without giving credit)
- Time theft (habitually robbing others of their time by arriving late)
- Failing to tithe (Mal 3:8, cf. Mt 23:23)

All these are forms of *depriving other people of something to which they are entitled*. When you break it down to this level, obviously our culture has a severe problem with the Eighth Commandment. And so do some of us. So let me remind you: stealing—even in these accepted forms—isn't a minor violation of personal property, a little "forced sharing" among friends. It's an attack on God's authority and an assault against human life.

But there's another form of stealing that hits much close to home:

Leviticus 19:13 You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning.

Ezekiel 22:29 The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery. They have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the sojourner without justice.

Oppression of the poor is a form of robbery. This includes exploitation, unjust court judgments, withholding wages, or withholding anything essential they need that you have power to provide:

Proverbs 3:27 Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.

Isaiah 10:1-2 Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, ² to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!

Notice the terms: "due" and "right." These are entitlements. The needs of the poor *entitle* them to a share of my surplus. The rich (like us) don't have any more rights; we just have more responsibility.

This isn't just an OT point or one squeezed into the margins of the Bible:

1 John 3:17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

1 Timothy 6:17-19 ¹⁷ As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. ¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, ¹⁹ thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

To turn a blind eye to a needy person when it's in my power to help isn't just cold-hearted and mean. It's stealing. It's breaking the 8th Comm.

As we saw in earlier sermons, when these commandments forbid a negative behavior, they require the alternative positive behavior. In this case, "Don't steal" becomes "Give whatever help you can."

Deut 22:1-4 is an illuminating cross reference, where the needs of neighbor aren't immediately material. He's just had an animal wander off. But inaction is not an option in this case. "You may not ignore it" (v 3) or withhold your help. Remember: my neighbor's straying ox represents economic endangerment for his family. I have to take steps

to provide for his life and wellbeing, as much as is in my power.

Deut 23:24-25 is also illuminating in this connection. It allows travelers to eat from their neighbor's crops but not take extra home. You could satisfy your hunger but not stock your cupboards. Your need was your neighbor's obligation, and you could help yourself without even being asked. Mutual care and gladness to share is the point of these commands.

"The Eighth Commandment here carries forward into the creation of a communal disposition to watch for the economic endangerment of other members of the community and **not to hide from it behind gated communities and the walling-off, literally or figuratively, of the ghettos of the economically endangered.**" (Miller, 324, emphasis added)

I love that metaphor of the "gated community." This is how we would often prefer to live: walled off from the problems, risks, vulnerability, inconveniences, and responsibilities that come from getting too close to people in need. But God hasn't left us that option.

Remember our previous point? If the Lord owns everything, we are only stewards, managers. And if He wants us to use His resources to care for the poor, that's what we have to do. It's grossly presumptuous for us to come up with our own ideas for how to use the resources He's entrusted us to manage for Him.

ILL: a parent asking an older child to pass out candy for Halloween and kid eats it all himself **[a real, personal story would be better]**

Jerry Bridges summarizes it like this. There are three possible attitudes toward possessions: "1. Stealing: What's yours is mine; I'll take it. 2. Hoarding: What's mine is mine; I'll keep it. 3. Sharing: What's mine is God's; I'll share it." (*Discipline of Grace*, 88)

When is a thief no longer a thief? Luke 19 tells the story of when Jesus met a well-known tax collector who was quite likely also a thief. (Sorry for the redundancy.) Anyway, the man Zacchaeus was so notorious for his sinful lifestyle that the people grumbled when Jesus went to his house for a visit. But later, Zacchaeus said something that made Jesus certain that this former thief was no longer a thief. What was it? After

his meeting with Jesus, Zacchaeus said: "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." (Luke 19:8) And so Jesus said: "Today salvation has come to this house."

A thief is no longer a thief, not merely when he has stopped stealing, but only when he has started giving. The former "taker" must become a generous giver.

Ephesians 4:28 *Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.*

How does Jesus fulfill the Eighth Commandment?

Jesus always does 2 things to these commandments: 1) deepens them and 2) transforms them. He deepens their claim—usually demanding more from us than we would ever expect. But He also transforms the commandments. He shows how He Himself is the focus of each commandment (2. He is the image of God, 4. He is the Sabbath, 6. He is the giver of life.). Every time this happens, He gives the commandment meaning we would never have seen there, except for Him.

He deepens the claim of the Eighth Commandment on our lives:

Luke 18:18-23 ¹⁸ *And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* ¹⁹ *And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."* ²⁰ *You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'"* ²¹ *And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth."* ²² *When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."* ²³ *But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.*

Jesus doesn't really mean that, does He? Sell everything to help the poor? He does. It's not a joke, and it's not an overstatement. This rich man's life depends on it, and if Jesus is playing a game, He's letting a man go to hell. No, He's not joking when He says we need to give up everything for His sake. After all, it's exactly what He did for us:

2 Corinthians 8:9 *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his*

poverty might become rich.

When we see the poor, broken, and needy, the gospel tells us that we are looking in the mirror. THAT was ME! We might say, "It's my money!" And Jesus could have said, "It's my life, my blood, my dignity." Or we might say, "They don't deserve help." To which Jesus could reply, "How deserving were you?" If you would be like Jesus, give much, give freely, give it all, for the miserable, undeserving, ungrateful poor.

This, friends, is exactly how Jesus fulfills the Eighth Commandment. ...by pouring out such lavish grace upon us, that we are more than happy to take Him as our treasure and gladly give everything else away.

Returning to the story of the rich young ruler:

Luke 18:24-30 ²⁴ *Jesus, looking at him with sadness, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"* ²⁵ *For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."* ²⁶ *Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?"* ²⁷ *But he said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."* ²⁸ *And Peter said, "See, we have left our homes and followed you."* ²⁹ *And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God,* ³⁰ *who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life."*

"For the sake of the kingdom of God." Imagine you are on your deathbed and your doctor tells you of a medicine that could cure you. "But it is extremely expensive. You'll have to sell everything you own to buy it – cars, investments, house, all of it." You would say, "What are those things to me now? They are nothing compared to this cure. If I do not get this medicine, my cars and house are worthless. I need this precious cure." When we see that God rescued us from poverty by impoverishing Himself, Jesus becomes so precious to us that all our possessions become utterly expendable. They used to be precious to us, but no more. (adapted from Keller, *Ministry of Mercy*, p 63)

Matthew 13:44 *The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*

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