

March 15, 2015

You Shall Not Steal

Exodus 20:15

Luke 19: 1 – 10

Today we come to the eighth commandment in the Decalogue – You shall not steal. In a perfect world, that's all I would have to say – 'Don't steal'. Just four little words. But it isn't a perfect world as you all know and so we need to take some time to flesh out these four little words and look at the implications of this simple command. While I think all of us would agree that stealing is wrong, we may not all agree on the definition of stealing. And my job this morning is to try and communicate to you what the Bible means when it says, 'Don't steal'. God intends to communicate something to us through this command and I don't want there to be any ambiguity as to what He intends to say. Real communication takes place when the encoder, the sender; and the decoder, the receiver, are on the same page.

Unlike the man living in Chicago, who one cold and snowy winter got fed up with being frozen all the time and called his wife who was in New York for a conference and told her he was flying down to Florida to get out of the cold and that she should join him there the next day. Everything went well. The guy got on a plane and in a few hours he was enjoying the hot sun and warm beaches of southern Florida. When he got back to his hotel room, he sent his wife an email to let her know he arrived safely. But unwittingly, he misspelled her email address and it wound up going to an elderly pastor's wife in Ohio whose husband had just passed away the day before. Upon opening the email and reading it, this elderly pastor's wife let out a shriek and fainted dead away. Her son, who was there taking care of her read what the guy in Florida had written in three short sentences: My beloved wife, you'll be happy to know that I have arrived safely. I can't wait for you to join me tomorrow. p.s. Sure is hot down here.

In order for there to be no ambiguity about the meaning and implications of this eighth command, I want to first define the term – what is stealing. Then talk about why we shouldn't steal – why stealing is wrong. And finally, given the fact that we live in an imperfect world as fallen, imperfect people, how can we hope to keep this command – in other words, how is it possible to not steal. What is stealing – why is it wrong – how do we not steal. We won't spend a lot of time on the first two because most of us have at least some sense of what it means to steal and that stealing is a bad thing to do and we shouldn't do it. But most of us also realize in our heart of hearts that we are by nature thieves, and we are guilty of breaking the eighth commandment many times over and we cannot keep this commandment perfectly.

Theft is a huge issue in the world, and it's always been an issue. I doubt if anyone here would disagree with that. Just a couple of test questions on that subject: Does anyone here not have locks on their doors at home? Have you installed a burglar alarm at your house? Does your car not have door locks? Do you have security codes on your computer? Ever been to a store that had security detectors and tags on stuff that set off the alarms? Locks and codes and alarms and security devices are there to prevent stealing. Stealing is a huge issue. Martin Luther said in his day that if they took all the people who were stealing and hung them, they would run out of rope, and they'd need to start using men's belts to hang them. It has always been a problem. I'm amazed every time I hear someone say 'Well, people are basically good, it's their culture that has warped them'. I'm tempted to say, 'What planet are you from?' Try this, leave your home unlocked and the keys in your car and then tell me about the basic goodness of people. One unfortunate picture I have seared in my memory is of my neighbor Rick, running down the street in front of my house, in his tighty whiteys at three in the morning, in hot pursuit of some thieves who had broken into his car and stolen his car stereo for the second time that month.

Stealing is a problem. But thieves will often argue over semantics, so let's define it. **What constitutes stealing?** Simply put, **stealing is taking something that does not belong to you without permission.** It doesn't matter what the status of the victim is. You can't invoke the Robin Hood principle – stealing from the rich is not a crime. That isn't what the Bible says. 'If you only take from the rich – then it's not stealing'. **Stealing is taking what belongs to others without their permission.** And we are not going to get sidetracked here on any discussion about the government.

But some people have this idea that if you take without permission from rich people, or wealthy institutions, then it's not really stealing at all. A Sunday School teacher was trying to get across this principle to her class and she asked them: 'If you were to find a briefcase with a million dollars in it, what would you do? And little Johnny's hand shot up and he said, 'If it belonged to some poor people, I'd give it back'.

That's not the biblical concept of not stealing. This is what the Bible says it looks like: if it's not yours, and you take it, you've stolen. That's the big idea. It's theirs, not yours. If you take what's theirs and make it yours, you're stealing. It is all over the Bible. In Genesis, Laban catches up with Jacob and says, 'I can understand you wanting to go home, but why did you steal my gods?' Joseph's brothers maintained their innocence to Joseph's steward when he confronted them with evidence of theft, *Behold, the money that we found in the mouths of our sacks we brought back to you from the land of Canaan. How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord's house?* The book of Exodus, which we just went through, is full of injunctions against taking what does not belong to you without permission.

And I think we all understand that principle. Blatent, overt thievery is condemned in nearly every culture and society in the world. I'll just mention some of them, and if the cap fits, wear it. Embezzling, extortion, burglary, larceny, highjacking, shoplifting, underpaying your taxes, filing false insurance claims, killing time at work, not paying your employees, taking supplies or goods and items from your employer, taking intellectual property, plagiarism, illegal downloads and video or cd copying, identity theft. And then there is institutional theft - unreasonably high interest rates, unfair payday loans, unjust taxation, governmental waste, excessive national debt. Blatent, overt stealing is fairly easy to recognize and condemn. It is the kind of obvious theft that everyone recognizes, and we don't need to beat it to death.

But what about other ways in which we break this commandment? Ways that might not be so obvious, or ways in which you've lied to yourself about the seriousness of the theft. How about when you borrow something and never return it? Some of you have got garages full of stuff that belongs to other people. I know I've got a whole library out there that hasn't come back. Don't look so guilty. I don't have anyone specific in mind. Fortunately I've forgotten to whom I've lent those books. If we make a career of borrowing stuff we never return, we are making a career of theft. We just call it borrowing. Or what about when we run someone down to other people? We've broken this commandment when we steal the reputation of others; when we slander others. There's a great scene in Shakespeares Othello where Iago complains: *Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, is the immediate jewel of their souls. Who steals my purse steals trash...But he that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him and makes me poor indeed.* We violate the person of our neighbor when we trash their name, their reputation.

We break the eighth commandment when we steal the purity of someone through illicit sex. You've stolen their purity. We break this commandment when we borrow and don't repay. Psalm 37:21 says '*The wicked borrows and does not repay*'. Ever borrowed money, having made a commitment to repay and then just not done it? You think about doing it but you never get around to it. That is stealing. Romans 13:7 - 8 says, '*Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed*'. Even if some legality (like bankruptcy) lets you off the hook, still it is wrong to not pay your debts. Human legal shenanigans do not override the law of God. Notice too, how Paul includes respect and honor in the list of things that if not paid are considered to be theft. What about keeping stuff you've found and never trying to find the owner? Is that theft? Deuteronomy 22 tells us: *You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep going astray and ignore them. You shall take them back to your brother. And if he does not live near you and you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home to your house, and it shall stay with you until your brother seeks it. Then you shall restore it to him.*

We break the eighth commandment in so many ways – too numerous to count. **But what makes stealing wrong?** Why is it wrong to steal? Sure it makes other people feel bad – the ones who get thieved. But what is it about stealing that makes it wrong? And there are two overarching reasons that stealing is wrong. Stealing violates God's law and violates your neighbor. The whole law is summed up in two commandments – Love God supremely and love your neighbor as yourself. Stealing violates both of those. We are abusing God's law and defiling God's creation. This commandment – You shall not steal – stands on two principles. The principle of God's unquestioned ownership of everything; and His delegation of that ownership to our stewardship of those things. There is inherent in this command the principles of the right to private property and the sovereign ownership of God over all that He has made.

The eighth commandment presupposes that we have the privileges of the rights to private property which are sacred to the owner of that property. We are not called into some sort of communal living where no one owns anything but shares everything. In a communal society you can't be accused of stealing because it all belongs to everybody. God is not a communist. But He's not a capitalist either. You see a communist says, 'Whose stuff is it – it's everybody's and you have to use it for everyone's benefit'. Capitalism says, 'Whose stuff is it – it's mine and I'll use it for my benefit'. But the Bible says, 'Whose stuff is it – it's God's and you have to use it like He wants it used.' This goes right back to the beginning where God created everything, and then He tells Adam, 'Now take care of this like I want you to'. We are not owners of anything in the sense that God is. He owns everything. *'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof...'* Psalm 24 *'Whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine'* the Lord declares in Job 41.

But we are given ownership in the form of stewardship over the things that God has given to us. We were made, not to be owners, but stewards of the things that God has made, because all ownership is simply a derived ownership. All that we have, we have because of the kindness and generosity of God. And I know I get some push back from those who say, 'Hey wait a minute. I'm a self-made man. I earned everything I have. No one gave me anything – I worked my tail off for all this'. First of all, if you consider yourself a self-made man, you should ask the maker for a refund. Secondly, where did you get the brains and energy in the first place? Why weren't you born with a debilitating handicap like many others? Why were you born in a prosperous place like America and not in a slum in Kenya? Where did you get the wherewithal to do all this hard work you've done? You have to understand that it was a gift from your Creator. I've seen people who work just as hard as you living on three dollars a day. Why don't they have the big house and five cars and all that you do?

That is why stealing is such a big deal. We are stewards of what God has given us, living in a world of other stewards, and stealing means that you are not only robbing your fellow stewards, you're robbing God. You are violating the person of your neighbor and you are violating the person of God. Have you ever had something of any value stolen from you? I have. Twice my car was broken into and my wallet and cash and credit cards were stolen. And beyond all the pain and trouble and irritation that caused, the deeper emotion was violation. I felt violated. Someone had been all over my stuff. It felt like I had been touched inappropriately by a stranger. It was an assault on my dignity and humanity. On the one hand I was simply a steward of what God had given me, but on the other, there was a violation of my private property rights. And if I can feel this profound sense of violation over a few dollars worth of stuff I don't even really own – imagine the magnitude of the violation against the real owner.

There is this remarkable passage in Malachi where God comes to His people and accuses them of stealing. *Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you? 'In your tithes and contributions'.* You see, God owns everything, and He then He gives us some of what He owns to steward and says, 'Now I want you to use my money and things the way I want. Use some of this for your own needs and then put the rest toward My kingdom work, helping the poor and making sure God's people don't go hungry'. ***We are robbing God when we act as though what we have is our own and use it entirely for ourselves.*** We are stealing from God – and of all the people you don't want to steal from, He would be at the top of the list. The violation I felt when my stuff was stolen pales in comparison to the magnitude of the violation of God's person when we steal from Him.

I hope you feel the weight of this commandment on your soul. I trust that the Spirit of God is moving in your heart, convicting you of those areas in which you have either violated your neighbor or violated God's law by your theft. I pray that each of us would understand that stealing is wrong for all the right reasons – that it violates God's law and it violates your neighbor. But if we just left it there you would be crushed by the weight of it all. Who can honestly say they have not stolen anything – ever? If you say that you haven't really heard the word this morning and you're deluded. This commandment exposes all of us as thieves, deserving of God's wrath.

So how can we not live like thieves? **How do we not steal?** How do we live our lives so as not to live like thieves? The answer is very simple. Stealing is all about getting. Getting something you want, getting something you don't have – getting stuff. So if the essence of stealing is getting – the essence of living a thievery free existence is **giving**. In Ephesians four, Paul is telling the believers that there is a new kind of living that is made possible through belief in Christ.

He says that when we come to Christ we put off the former manner of living of the old self and put on the new self that is created in the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. And then he goes on to lay out what that looks like. And one of the things he targets is stealing. He says. *'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'*. So the thief is not someone who has come to Christ and simply stops being a thief. But the thief is somebody whose hands have once been used for taking and are now, through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, to be used for giving. Where thievery once marked his life, generosity now marks his life. A life of taking has become a life of giving. Instead of not working and stealing, he now works *so that* he is able to give.

The eighth commandment is giving us the negative side of the positive command in 1 Corinthians 10: *Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor*. What would it look like if everyone in the world went around seeking the good of others and not their own? What would it look like in your life if you took this to heart? What would it look like if your children gladly obeyed this? It is a radically transforming word. It is absolutely counter to what most everyone in the world believes. And it is what happens when salvation comes into your life. You can tell when Christ is enthroned in your heart. You don't care anymore about getting; your life becomes all about giving. Only the soul transformed by the power of God will leave off thieving to begin giving.

In Luke 19 there is a story of such a life. Jesus was going through Jericho and He encounters a man named Zacchaeus, and the Scripture tells us that he was a chief tax collector and he was wealthy. The two were synonymous – if you're a tax collector – you're wealthy. Everybody understood that. They were wealthy because they were thieves. That's how the system worked. Tax collectors were independent contractors that contracted with the Roman government to collect taxes. The government simply gave them an area, told them how much revenue they expected from that area, and then turned them loose. Everything they collected above the expected amount, they could keep. And these guys were ruthless. The IRS today has nothing on them. And everybody hated these guys. They knew that they were being ripped off but they couldn't prove it because they had no idea of what the tax was supposed to be.

One day Zacchaeus hears that Jesus is coming to Jericho and he wants to get a glimpse of this guy everybody is talking about. But he was a short man, vertically challenged, as we would say, and he knew he'd never get through the crowd to see Jesus. He might even have been mugged had he stood there along with the rest of the crowd, knowing their hatred for tax collectors. So he climbs up this tree and waits for Jesus to pass by. *And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."* And Zacchaeus must have thought, 'Man, out of all the places Jesus could have stopped, He stops under my place'. But it wasn't his place. It was Jesus' place. He took the initiative to stop there. And He says, 'Zacchaeus, get down, I must stay at your place today'. When salvation comes to us, it is always because Jesus takes the initiative to stop at our place. And when Jesus shows up and looks us in the eye and says, 'I must stay at your house' the answer of your heart is 'You're right, you must!'

Not surprisingly, when the crowd saw that of all the people present, Jesus picks out this rascal to eat with, they start grumbling. 'Hey wait a minute. Why does this guy get special treatment? Does Jesus know who this is? He's been stealing the whole place blind. Everybody in Jericho knows that when you say Zacchaeus, you say thief. Why would He go to his place?' Verse 10 tells us. *'Because the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost'*. And when Jesus went into Zacchaeus' house, what do you think He did? I can't prove it, but I think Jesus went through the Law of God with Zacchaeus; and said 'Zacchaeus, how you doing with this? Let's just run through these and see how you're doing. How are you doing with loving God supremely? Oh I think I'm doing pretty good there. Any idols, Zacchaeus? No, no idols, I'm good. How about the Sabbath? Oh, I go to synagogue every Sabbath and I for sure don't collect taxes on the Sabbath. How about the seventh commandment? Are you stepping out on your wife on those business trips? Oh definitely not.'

'Well then, how about stealing Zacchaeus?' At that moment, Zacchaeus would have felt the full weight of the law come crashing down on him, and it was at that moment I believe, repentance flooded his soul. And you say how do you know that? I know that because the Scripture records his confession: *"Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."* The law required that he doubled what he stole and give a fifth back to the Lord – Zacchaeus goes way beyond that.

There's probably someone out there saying, 'Oh I get it. The way you become a Christian is you reduce your net worth by fifty percent and you pay back four times everything you ever stole from somebody. And then you get a credit you present at the gates of heaven and you say, 'Hey I did that deal that Zacchaeus did with the fifty percent and the four times payback, and now you have to let me in'. And you would be dead wrong. Jesus would have told Zacchaeus, 'Zacchaeus, if you were to work for the rest of your life to repay everything you stole; if you were to spend the rest of your life giving money to the poor; if you were to turn over a new leaf and never steal again; you could never begin to repay the debt you owe to the God from whom you stole'. That great hymn we sing, Rock of Ages, sums it up perfectly:

*Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

You see, keeping the commandments is not about trying to make sure you don't break them. If you are only trying to not steal, you haven't got it. Keeping the commandments requires another kind of life. Our broken and sinful human life is not enough to save us. What we need is another life. And Jesus would have told Zacchaeus: 'You can never repay your debt. But that is why I came. To do what you could never do.' The penalty for not keeping even one of the commandments is eternal punishment. What hope do any of us have within ourselves to keep them all? Or even one, perfectly? Salvation did not come to Zacchaeus because he decided to give to the poor and pay back fourfold all that he had stolen. Salvation came because Zacchaeus finally realized the extent of his sin and put his trust in the One who could repay His debt with God. The ability to keep God's law is powered by the creation of a new life on the inside by trusting in Christ. That is why Jesus could say, '*Today, salvation has come to this house*'. **Repaying his debts and giving to the poor was evidence of a life transformation in Zacchaeus, not the cause of it.**

The God to whom we owe the debt came to pay our debt. He lived without sin, no debt, no spiritual debt whatsoever. He went to the cross and He died in our place to pay our debt. He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. Jesus suffered so that we don't have to suffer. Jesus stood in our place so that we don't have to spend forever in hell. That's the good news of the gospel. When Jesus died, our debt was paid. Isn't it remarkable that the Bible records that when Jesus was crucified, He was crucified between two thieves? One of the things that says is that by nature we are thieves. We will always break the law of God here. But the good news of the Gospel is that even while they were hanging there on their own crosses, one of the thieves trusted in Christ and was saved. The bad news is that the other was not. The question this morning is not, are you a thief? That question has been settled. The real question is, are you the thief who didn't turn to Jesus or are you the thief that turns to Jesus? **Are you the thief who has to pay their own debt in hell or are you the thief who has trusted in Jesus to pay your debt on the cross?**

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for Your wonderful word that shines so brightly into the dark recesses of our souls, exposing and revealing the sin that hides Your face from us. The wonderful words of Your law work not only to show us our desperate condition and our deep need of You, but also brings to us the gracious good news that the death of Your Son has paid our debt in full if only we would trust in Him. Some of us this morning are keenly aware of the magnitude of our sin in not keeping Your commandment not to steal. We have stolen from others, we have stolen from You. Help us now to confess it and repent of it and make restitution for it. We ask for grace that we might have faith to repent and believe so that You might announce that today salvation has come to our house, we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.