

“Pilfering, Lifting, Swiping, Filching and otherwise Stealing.”

Exodus 20:15

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Mark Twain supposedly said, "It is not good sportsmanship to pick up a 'lost' golf ball while it is still rolling."

God said that differently and much more seriously, "You - shall not - steal."

A number of years ago I had a car I needed to sell.

It had many dents and one whole section of a rear fender area that had rusted through.

I took it to the garage of a friend and I worked for many nights using fiberglass patches and putty filling the dents that I couldn't pull out.

There were a great many repairs but when I finished and repainted the car it looked great.

But I knew the extent of the patching and puttying and I suspected that even a stout tire kick would cause some of the putty to fall off. But I advertised the car and priced it as if it were in the excellent condition it appeared.

A prospective buyer saw the car, loved it and was ready to pay me nearly what I was asking.

If you had been me, what would you have done?

Caveat emptor? – Let the buyer beware?

Or was I about to commit fraud, to steal from the unaware?

Exodus 20:15 "You - shall not - steal."

Just so you don't think even less of me than you have a right to, I want you to know that the Holy Spirit pricked my conscience and I told the truth about the car. The man didn't purchase it.

I lowered the price and told the next inquirer about the condition of the car and he bought it (I mean he purchased it).

A few years ago pollster George Barna reported that 91% of evangelical Christians said they keep the 8th Commandment – they never steal. (Barna Report, 1992, 117)

Really?

We don't like to call what we do "stealing;" we are not thieves!

There is naturally a stigma attached to those words.

We like to call our sins by other names – a lie becomes a fib, adultery is simply an affair, false witness is an exaggeration, and stealing is snatching, palming, lifting, filching, copping, pinching, and the best, "borrowing."

But God calls it what it is.

And God calls it by its worst name so we will understand the seriousness and sinfulness of it.

500 years ago John Calvin understood this when he wrote, "As (we are) always on the alert to (take less seriously) the heinousness of sin...and to cover it by (deceptive names), the Lord sets forth, by way of example, whatever is foulest and most (sinful) in each (Commandment), that the (hearing) of it might produce a shudder in the hearer, and impress his mind with a deeper abhorrence of sin... For example, anger and hatred do not seem so very bad when they are designated by (those) names ("anger" and "hatred"); but when they are prohibited under the name of "murder," we understand better how abominable they are in the sight of God, who puts (anger and hatred) in the same class with that horrid crime (of murder). Influenced by his judgment, we (become better able) to judge more accurately the heinousness of our offences, which previously seemed trivial. (Calvin, Institutes 2.8.10)

We may wish to call our actions by other names that make them seem harmless but God calls this what it is - stealing.

And his words, "You shall not steal," are so simple, so straightforward and so totally encompassing.

He doesn't say don't steal in this particular way or that particular way.

He simply says, “don’t steal” leaving nothing outside of the prohibition.

My desire today is that the Holy Spirit would sensitize our consciences afresh; that we would have a renewed understanding of the holy character of our God and our holy calling to reflect him in our actions.

This message today is to **Christians** just as it was originally a message to **God’s** people.

They didn’t become God’s people and we don’t become Christians by obeying the 10 Commandments, they became and we become God’s people by God’s grace.

But God’s grace didn’t stop at spiritual birth, he also wants us to live out the new relationship we have with him and each other.

Living as the people of God then and now is what the 10 Commandments are about.

And so they are presented to us not simply to shame us and produce guilt but that they will lead us to repentance – a turning away from those things defame the name of our Father-God and turning to imitating the character of our Lord.

I want us to see our sin for what it is and run to the Savior for forgiveness and empowerment to live differently.

So what does God encompass/include in this prohibition of stealing?

It had been a late game on Monday night football, and because the Broncos lost Jeff knew he’d lost his \$10.00 in the office football pool.

And so the next morning he was also tired and remembering that he’d worked especially hard during his 8 hours at the office last Friday, he decided to go in a little late this morning; no one would notice and if they did, he’d blame it on traffic.

On his way to the office, he stopped at the store to purchase tickets for an upcoming movie.

His son had turned 13 two days earlier but he still purchased a child's ticket – after all, if he'd purchased the tickets just two days earlier...

While he was checking out he also purchased a lottery ticket and walking to the car he scratched it and found that he'd won \$20.

And he thought, "You lose some, you win some, but it all works out in the end doesn't it?"

When he got back in the car he realized that he'd forgotten to return a movie video that he rented from the store.

But he decided not to go back in to the store because he was already late for work and because he'd probably never try to rent from there again anyway.

He got to work late but he plowed right in to the day's tasks.

One of his jobs was to do the pricing of promotional items in his store.

He had discovered that by combining items in quantities of three people would assume the price was lower per piece than purchasing them individually.

The company picked up a little more profit when people assumed that three for \$8 was a better deal than \$2.50 each.

Later, as he ended lunch with two clients he noticed that the server had failed to bill him for their beverages.

He thought of all the times he'd been overcharged by restaurants and decided this made it closer to even.

He paid the bill as it was.

Remembering, however, that he would turn the bill in for reimbursement, he handwrote the amount for the tip on his receipt and made it for a dollar more than he had actually left on the table.

After lunch he got on line at his computer and spent nearly 30 minutes trying to find tickets for the next Broncos' game.

Serendipitously, the guy from the mailroom came past.

Everyone in the office strongly suspected the mail guy got extra tickets in some shady manner but that was his problem Jeff thought and Jeff bought the two tickets he wanted –good price too.

Just before he left work, he remembered the bills from home in his briefcase that he meant to put in the mail.

He asked the company receptionist/secretary for some stamps and he dropped the envelopes in the mail slot on his way out the door.

When he got to church the next Sunday, he saw the sermon title.

Remembering that on the way to church, some guy had cut him off in traffic, Jeff was thankful the sermon wasn't about taking the Lord's name in vain.

"Fortunately for me," he thought, "today's sermon is only "You shall not steal."

So sitting down in his chair he took out his checkbook and on his \$62,000 annual income he wrote out his monthly \$200 check for the work of the church.

The world may not call it stealing but God does.

Again it was John Calvin who wrote, "When people have deceived others (or themselves), they think that at the same time they have blinded God... But God will not retreat from our fantasy" (Calvin, Sermons on Ten Commandments,189)

"You shall not steal."

God includes all theft in his prohibition whether it is the child who steals a penny candy or UN officials who take millions in the Oil for Food program.

Stealing comes in many forms:

Overcharging for a product or even overcharging for our time;

“Whatever the traffic will bear” is a principle of capitalism-gone-bad; it is not a principle from God.

Even pagans know that charging \$5 for liter-bottles of water is unscrupulous in the aftermath of a hurricane.

Another form of stealing is taking advantage of an unsuspecting or powerless person;

Proverbs 20:14 “It's no good, it's no good!" says the buyer (attempting to get the price down) then off he goes and boasts about his purchase.”

And we call it shrewd (wily, artful ways of dealing).

What does God call it?

Stealing is selling a faulty product;

It is not declaring some income on our taxes or inflating our deductibles;

It has been said that if every individual and company were to pay their fair taxes the national debt would be paid off in only a very few years.

Stealing is sneaking entrance to an event;

It is failure to give God his due in time, money or talent;

Stealing is the merchant who uses false weights or volumes – a gas station pump that is just 1/10 of one penny off;

Deuteronomy 25:13-16 “Do not have two differing weights in your bag--one heavy, one light. ¹⁴ Do not have two differing measures in your house--one large, one small. ¹⁵ You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. ¹⁶ For the LORD your God **detests** anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly.

Stealing is the purchasing manager or sales rep who use kickbacks to make a sale or a public servant who uses his office to enrich himself;



Just four days ago the newspapers ran the following story:

WASHINGTON — Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham tearfully resigned from Congress on Monday after pleading guilty to charges that he took at least \$2.4 million in bribes from defense contractors and others.

Speaking to reporters, Cunningham, a former Vietnam War fighter pilot, broke down as he confessed about abusing the trust of his colleagues, friends and family. "The truth is I broke the law, concealed my conduct and disgraced my office," he said in televised remarks, his voice shaking. "In my life I have had great joy and great sorrow. And now I know great shame."

Video at: http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-11-28-cunningham_x.htm?POE=NEWISVA

Stealing is the lender who charges exorbitant interest rates.

It is the receiver of stolen goods

From the on-line magazine Salon this past year I read the following:

A recent study commissioned by the Gospel Music Association found that born-again teens file-trade just as much as their not-saved peers. "It doesn't make any difference if you prefer gospel music or death metal; you're still just as likely to file-swap.

John W. Styll, president of the Gospel Music Association said, "I think that we perhaps naively hoped that the

Christian teens would have been taking the moral high road. But among teens, they just don't see it as a moral issue. Ninety percent of them don't see illegal downloading as wrong. It may be illegal, but everyone is doing it." (Salon.com on line magazine May 25, 2004)

Stealing is the failure to correct an error in our favor;

Last Wednesday I went to the library soft drink machine to get a diet Pepsi. I put in my money and out came a bottle of water. I should have taken that as a kind reminder from God, but I took the water to the counter and asked for my money back so I could get a diet Pepsi.

They gave me my money and told me to keep the water because there was no way they could return it. I took the money and the water and went back to the machine, planning to simply leave the water on the machine for someone else. Assuming the Pepsi button was wrongly labeled, I pushed the button for Diet Dr. Pepper. Out came a diet Dr. Pepper and a Diet Pepsi. I now stood there with three bottles having only paid for one. What do I do?

I went back to the counter and said I now have three bottles having only paid for one. I'm going to take my Diet Pepsi and leave the other two bottles with you to determine the ethical thing to do, and I walked away.

Stealing is failure to pay a just wage for someone's labor;

James 5:4-5 "Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵

You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.

Shoplifting – 100 million incidents per year worth over \$100 billion.

False advertising.

Winning at gambling – in order for you to win, another must lose.

Market manipulation to increase stock price

Loafing on the job or doing personal work on company time.

Many years ago I worked for Commonwealth Edison the Chicago area electric utility company. I wasn't the CEO; I read electric meters in the neighborhoods and businesses. The first day on the job, not knowing any better, I actually worked 8 hours. I'd get a long list of the homes I was to visit to read their meters and when I finished I'd go back to get more. After one day of this, I was confronted sternly by the steward who told me in no uncertain terms that I was messing up the system. The next day he wanted me to go with him and he would show me how it is done. We got our lists in the morning and immediately went to a coffee shop some distance from the office. There we sat until about 10 a.m. He suggested that we meet back at the coffee shop about 2 after I had run my route. Done with my route in less than 4 hours, I hung around until 2 and met him and others again at the coffee shop until we went back to the office about 4:15. During our "breaks" he told me I could run my route as fast as I wanted to and after that I could go home or go do whatever I wanted to do, but I was never to return to the office until 4:15. He said that he and the others had worked for years to get the routes down in size to what they were and he didn't want some snot-nosed kid from the farm ruining the good thing they had going.

Stealing – it comes in many forms.

We may call it by many other names, but to God they are all the same.

Why is stealing wrong?

First of all, it's wrong because God says it's wrong!

I didn't like my father saying I had to obey him just because he said to, but I quickly learned that he thought that was reason enough.

My earthly father didn't always know best but I have learned that my heavenly Father does.

And in much of life I simply have to trust him.

But stealing is also wrong because it is the very opposite of the character of our God who is a giving God not a taking God.

Romans 8:32 “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

If I’m going to imitate my Lord, I will be a generous giver not a selfish stealer.

Stealing is also wrong because it violates the God-given dignity of another human being.

This is a bit abstract for me, but consider this: Personal freedom, personal space, personal possessions are part of what it means to be human.

God made us that way.

God made us as flesh and blood with names, addresses and belongings.

We are expected to work, to acquire, to possess.

There is a distinct difference between one human being and another; each is unique.

There is autonomy, independence, which is part of that uniqueness.

A measure of control over one’s own person includes a measure of control over one’s possessions; it is part of that autonomy.

In order to maintain that autonomy, others must not be allowed to encroach.

We can’t invade the space of another without violating their God-given right.

And so theft violates the person not just his property – ask anyone whose house has been broken into or who has been robbed.

God dignifies human beings by giving them work to do, from which they can expect to receive some of the fruit of their labor. . .”

Genesis 2:15-16: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God

commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; . . .”

Theft is the failure to accept this creational intention of God.

The thief disdains God’s order of life, which is, in part, work and reward and both the victim and the thief are diminished.

Stealing is wrong because it violates the God-given dignity of another human being.

Lastly, stealing is wrong because it violates God’s ownership of all things.

When we take from another, we take what God has given them.

God has granted it to them, they are the stewards.

To steal from them is to steal from God and to rebel against God’s desires.

Why do we have such a propensity to steal?

Aside from learning to obey his parents, one of the first things a child must learn is not to steal.

As soon as an infant is old enough to want, they reach out to get.

The fact that it belongs to another is only an obstacle to be overcome not a reason not to take it.

And by early childhood, stealth will often be employed in getting what they want.

What drives the little thief and for that matter, what drives us?

Two things come to mind: Need or greed.

I want to suggest three actions and one attitude that God has given us by which we may respond to our need and resist greed.

Four words: **Work**, **Stewardship**, **Contentment** and **Generosity**.

What is the primary means God has established by which our needs may be met? **Work**

Genesis 2:15-16 “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden.”

2 Thessalonians 3:10 “When we were with you, we gave you this rule: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”

Childbearing was not a result of the sin of Adam and Eve – but difficult **labor** in childbearing was.

Likewise, work is not a result of the “fall” – but work as **unusually hard** or difficult is.

Work itself, as we see in Genesis 2:15, is a gift from God by which we live out our humanity, bring glory to God and meet our needs.

And so the Bible says in Ephesians 4:28, “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands...”

Thomas Watson said, “An idle person tempts the devil to tempt him.” Watson, *The Ten Commandments*,
168)

Work!

The second word is “stewardship.”

God said to Adam in Genesis 2:15 “work and **take care of it**.”

God has given most of us the means by which we may care for our own physical needs.

Part of that has to do with **what we do with what we earn** from our work.

I haven’t time in this message, but it has to do with frugality and saving.

I love the Financial Peace University and Crown Ministries courses taught here in our own church – helping us in this issues of stewardship of what God provides.

But it also has to do with the proper use of God’s earth – environmental issues.

Crop rotations, water conservation, pollution controls and much more are not only “cool” things to be for, they are in fact honoring to the God who gave us the earth to supply our needs.

If it is **need** that drives some to steal, there are ways that they and we can help meet that need without stealing.

The third word to meet our need and ward against greed is contentment.

Philippians 4:12 “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”

Even in need, the Apostle Paul would remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:25-33 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear... Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

This contentment has to do with trust – Do I trust that God both knows and will meet my need according to his love for me?

Consider this, our present situation is God’s will for us.

Now lest you think that sounds like fatalism, think also of this:

- It doesn’t mean this is his will forever but it is for now.
- It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t attempt to alter our circumstances, but we must do so with a confidence in God that if the circumstances don’t alter, he is still there and in control. And it means we will remain content in him and not use unlawful means to circumvent his present will for us.

Hebrews 13:5 "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

I know that is hard for us in our culture where having more is an idol. Greed is an inordinate desire for more.

But as soon as a lust for more takes hold of us we have opened the door to thievery in our lives.

And so the fourth word is the antidote for greed; it is generosity.

Remember the Apostle Paul's words in Ephesians 4:28 "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, **that he may have something to share with those in need.**

Have you thought of that as a primary purpose for working and earning?

As I have commented before many times, nothing breaks the stranglehold of greed better or faster than generosity.

If greed has a grip on you, break its hold by giving.

And don't wait for some great need of others to pull it from you.

I.A.R. Wylie said: "True generosity requires more of us than kindly impulse. Above all it requires imagination--the capacity to see people in all their perplexities and needs, and to know how to expend ourselves (*not just our money*) effectively for them."

(In sermon by Pat Harrison PBC Cupertino, CA Aug 6, 1995)

Am I, are you, a taker (another euphemism for "thief") or a giver?

It doesn't take thousands of rules or books of explanation to know how to respond to the 10 Commandments and this commandment in particular:

Romans 13:9 "The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "**Do not steal**," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Work, Stewardship, Contentment, and Generosity are God's gracious means to meet our needs and keep us from greed so that we may not steal.

Let me close with Paul's great words again in Ephesians 4:28 "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need."

"You shall not steal."