

Do not steal

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 19th March 2006

“You shall not steal” (Exodus 20.14).

Introduction

In our studies of the Ten Commandments we come now to the eighth commandment: “You shall not steal.” We noted in a previous booklet (“You shall not commit adultery”) how views concerning the seventh commandment have changed. Views on this commandment have also moved dramatically in the last 40 years or so. Theft, dishonesty and corruption are rife, from the very highest levels of society to the lowest levels. Again there is a danger that shifting attitudes in society at large will find their way into the church, so it will do us good to be reminded of the teaching of Scripture on this subject.

I want us here to think together about what stealing is, then to consider how God views it, and then to consider what we are to do instead.

1. What is stealing?

What is stealing? It is taking something which does not belong to you. There are many different forms that stealing can take. Here are some of them:

- Taking something that is in the open. In our culture it has become widely accepted that if someone leaves something outside unlocked and unattended then anyone may help themselves to it. But why should it have to be locked? And what right do we have to have it, just because it has been left unattended? Not long ago anyone could leave a bicycle outside his house, knowing it would not be moved. It is a sad indictment on our society that in some places you cannot now leave a bicycle for five minutes without it being

stolen. If something has been genuinely thrown away, and no-one will be hurt by your salvaging and making good use of it, then there is no harm done. For example, if someone has discarded a drink can on the pavement, if you pick up that can and sell the aluminium then you are doing no harm, indeed you are doing good. But just because something is unattended does not necessarily mean it is thrown away. If at all possible check with the owner. If you are in any doubt at all, do not touch anything that does not belong to you.

- Stealing by finding. Stealing by finding is where you find something that has been lost, and you do not make reasonable effort to contact the owner. If you find a sum of money in the street, take it to a Police Station, or if you find something large which cannot be easily taken to a Police station take it into your house for safe keeping and contact the Police immediately. If the Police are unable to trace the owner, then after a period of time you may keep it. But if you do not make the necessary effort to contact the owner you are stealing.

- Burglary. Burglary is one step worse than stealing something which is in an open place, since it involves breaking an entry into someone else's property. We should never force our way into someone else's property, except in the most dire of circumstances, such as to rescue someone in a fire, and never help ourselves to items from a person's property. If you should come across a house that someone else has broken into, you should report it to the Police so that it may be properly secured, and not enter yourself.

- Robbery. Robbery is one step worse still than burglary, because it involves using violence, or the threat of violence, in order to obtain what the other person has. Someone who robs is effectively breaking the sixth commandment (Do not murder) as well as this commandment.

- Being lazy at work. This is another form of theft. Your employer is paying you good money, in good faith, to work a certain number of hours to the best of your ability. If you use your work time to chat with your work colleagues about non-work issues, or to conduct your own business affairs, then you are stealing from your employer. So is taking materials from your workplace without permission. If you take tools, or stationery or other items from your work place, you are stealing from your employer. You are in a

position of trust at work. Do not misuse that trust.

- Working too hard. How is working too hard theft? Because you are stealing, not from your employer but from your family. Some people are so concerned to build a name for themselves as top employees or managers that they virtually "sell their soul" to their employer. They thus steal from their families and fellow church members the time which they should give to them.

- Pilfering from the family. If you go to the kitchen cupboard and help yourself to biscuits or sweets without permission, you are stealing. Equally, if you go to your brother's or sister's bedroom and take their mobile phone to play with, or take some money, you are stealing. Stealing from your family members is very destructive to family life, because the family unit is built upon trust. Family members should know that within the confines of the home they and their possessions are safe.

- Not paying taxes. The Bible makes it clear that the State can legitimately demand taxes from its subjects (Romans 13.6). If you do not pay the taxes you should pay, then you are stealing from the State. Equally, if you claim benefit to which you are not entitled, then you are stealing.

- Treating customers poorly. If you run a business, and a customer sends you money for an order, and you do not dispatch that order promptly, then you are stealing the use of that money from your customer, even if eventually you do send the goods. The same applies if you are late sending credits for goods which have been returned, or you do not send credits at all. You are also stealing from your customer if you sell as being in good condition goods that you know to be faulty.

- Not repaying what you have borrowed. If you borrow a book, and do not return it, then you have stolen that book. If you take out a loan, and you do not repay that loan, then you are stealing from your creditor. If you do borrow money, make sure that you are going to have the means to repay it. Otherwise, not only are you being irresponsible, you are also effectively stealing.

- Insurance fraud. Many will think nothing of exaggerating an insurance claim, or a personal injury claim, in order to get the most out of an adverse

event that has happened in their lives. If you exaggerate harm done by an incident in order to claim more than is the real cost of what has been lost, then you are stealing.

– Begging on the basis of false information. Some people are professional beggars. They make up stories about a loved one having died many miles away, and needing to have the money to go to the funeral, in order to get money out of others. If you beg on the basis of false information, you are stealing.

– Making illegal copies of copyrighted material. If you download copyrighted songs off the internet, or if you make illegal copies of software, DVDs or songs that you borrow off a friend, then you are stealing the royalties that should go to the copyright holder.

– Handling stolen goods. If you buy something that you know is stolen, or you have reason to believe may be stolen, then you are aiding and abetting theft, and you are joining in the sin of another. It is legitimate and right to ask where things have come from, and if you are not given a satisfactory answer, or you have reason to doubt the person who answers, leave well alone.

– Laziness. The Bible makes it plain that we have no right to eat food that we have not earned through our work. “If a man will not work he shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3.10). If you are able-bodied you should do your utmost to find employment, and until you do find work you should fill your days with voluntary work for others.

2. What God thinks of stealing

What, then does God think of stealing? The answer is that God views it as a very serious sin indeed. It is so serious that God has said that those who habitually commit this sin without repentance will not be admitted into the Kingdom of heaven. The apostle Paul says,

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6.9 - 10).

This is not saying that those who have once committed such sins will not enter the kingdom of God, because he goes on to say “And that is what some of you were, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” What it is saying, however, is that those who habitually practice such sins – and stealing is one of the sins mentioned – without repentance, will not enter the kingdom of heaven. If you habitually steal, so that it could accurately be said about you that you are a thief, if you do not repent, then you will be sent to Hell.

Why does God view stealing so seriously? Here are some reasons:

1) Because stealing is an outward manifestation of greed

What is it that leads a person to steal what does not belong to him? The answer is greed. Stealing is one of the clearest signs that greed is at work in a person's life. It is not the only sign. Compulsive purchase of new items, even to the point of going seriously into debt, is another sign of greed. But stealing is one of the clearest and strongest signs of the sin of greed being at work in a person's life.

Greed is where gaining possession of objects is considered so important that it becomes all-consuming. We love things instead of loving God. So it is a form of idolatry. The apostle Paul tells us,

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person — such a man is an idolater — has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient (Ephesians 5.3 – 6).

A greedy person is an idolater. So we see how this commandment ties up with the first and second commandments. God said

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below” (Exodus 20.2 - 4).

If you steal then you are displaying greed, and therefore you are putting idols in the place of God.

2) Because stealing involves rebellion against God's order for this world

God has created the world with property rights. He has also given different gifts to different people. We see this in realm of natural gifts. Some are highly intelligent, some are moderately so, and some have considerable learning difficulties. Some are very good looking, many are not so good looking. We see it also with spiritual gifts. God gives different gifts to different people. So, equally, with material wealth, God has so ruled that some are exceedingly wealthy, others less so, and many are poor. God has also provided means whereby we may increase our wealth, through hard work, honest trading, and saving.

Stealing involves a rebellion against God's order. The person who steals is saying, effectively, "I don't like the way God has ordered the world. I am not going to keep to God's rules about how to obtain wealth. I am going to break the rules and going to grab what I want for myself."

So the person who steals is like the person described in Psalm 2, who joins together with other sinners against the LORD and against his anointed saying, "Let us throw off their chains...and throw off their fetters" (Psalm 2.2).

Such rebellion is both wrong and foolish, because no person can take on God in a contest and win. God considers such rebellion worthy of his derisory laughter (Psalm 2.3).

3) Because stealing injures others

If you steal you are inevitably hurting someone. That person has worked hard and has saved and gone without luxuries in order to be able to afford the valuable item which in a moment you take away from him. Even if the item is insured, there is considerable inconvenience and unhappiness caused to the person from whom you steal. And someone will have to pay for the cost of what you have taken, either the individual, or the policy holders of other insurance policies.

The person from whom you steal is an individual made in the image of God, so by hurting your fellow human being you are attacking God.

Jesus said, "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7.12). How do you feel when someone steals something that belongs to you? Well, do not yourself steal from others.

3. What we should do instead

What, then, should we do instead of stealing? The first and most important thing is that we need to come to Christ for salvation from our sins. Have you been saved from your sin? If you were to die tonight, where would you go, heaven or hell? If you are in any uncertainty, make sure of your salvation by coming to the Lord Jesus Christ and trusting in him. He died on the Cross to enable thieves to be saved. Consider what happened to the thieves who were crucified with Jesus. One died with curses on his lips, and we can presume that he went to Hell. The other turned from his sin and trusted in the Jesus who was dying next to him on the Cross. Jesus said to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Thieves, along with all other sinners, who turn from their sin and trust in Christ, will be saved. So come to Christ. His blood is able to wash away all your sins and able to make you into a new person.

Having been saved, the crucial thing to overcome the sin of stealing is to learn contentment. The writer to the Hebrews writes,

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." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13.5 – 6).

So many people are anxious to store up a great quantity of wealth because they wish to have a "buffer" to protect them from the sorrows and uncertainties of life. But the true Christian knows that he has a heavenly Father who is looking after him, so he does not need to store up masses of wealth to give him that sense of security. Moreover, if you are a Christian, you have been blessed with vast spiritual blessings. You are going to inherit the glory of God, and share in the new world that God will create when Jesus comes again. So you do not need to be overly concerned about gaining more things in this world. If God so rules that you prosper in this world, then thank God for his kindness to you. If he so rules that you are without many of the comforts of this world, do not worry about it, because you have wonderful pleasures lined up for the world to come. By all means try to improve your situation through legitimate means, but

do not use a “short cut” to try to make your life here more comfortable.

Instead of being greedy and stealing, we need to learn to work hard to provide for our own needs and for the needs of others. The apostle Paul says, “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” (Ephesians 4.28). Did you used to be a thief? Find a job, if you do not have one already, and if you are physically capable of work. Then work hard at your job, so that not only your needs will be provided for, but you will then be able to provide for the needs of others as well. See what the Gospel does. It turns the greedy, selfish, individual who used to steal to satisfy his wants into a loving person who, far from stealing, now is generous to others in need.

As part of our repentance we also need to take stock of what we have in our homes, and where necessary return what does not belong to us. It is said that in the time of the East African revival new barns had to be built to store the different tools and items that had previously been stolen and now were returned. Are there things in your home which you borrowed a long time ago and you have never got round to returning? Make the effort to sort these things out. Are there things you stole from others, perhaps years ago? Go to them and confess your sin, and make restitution. When Zachaeus, the greedy and corrupt tax collector was convicted of his sin, he said to the Lord, “Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything I will pay back four times the amount” (Luke 19.8). Are there illegal copies of songs on your computer or MP3 player? Delete them. Do you have pirated CDs and DVDs? Destroy them. Let us make sure that there is nothing in our homes which we would have any reason to be ashamed of if a close audit were made of all our possessions. “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this [the new heavens and the new earth], make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him (2 Peter 3:14).

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