

Stealing

HN 5/06/05 pm

Reading: Joshua 7, Ephesians 4

Study Text: Deuteronomy 5:19

Sing Psalms: 24:1-5, 37:16-21, 62:5-8, 62:10-12

As the trucks entered the city the drivers would put their hand out the window and give something to the policeman standing by the roadside. He was there to stop trucks going down this narrow road into the city. But most of the trucks were going down that road anyway. That gift, it seemed, made the policeman turn a blind eye to the law.

Corruption extends from the lowest to the highest sector of many societies. The chief of the World Bank identified corruption as the greatest impediment to progress in many nations. No society can function without honesty and mutual respect for the property of others.

You have probably experienced the awful feeling of having had something stolen from your person, your car or your house. You probably felt bitter towards the unknown thief – and maybe towards others also. You would have felt insecure and less trusting of others. Stealing leads to a breakdown in relationships.

Stealing is actually a **symptom** of broken relationships – the relationship we had with our creator God, and with our fellow man in the beginning. Disobedience and sin broke those relationships there in the Garden of Eden. The sin of coveting entered the world and coveting is the seed of stealing.

The law of God given through Moses states *you shall not steal*. You must not take for yourself what rightly belongs to another person. You must not take what rightfully belongs to the community or state, nor what rightfully belongs to God.

Most people, like the rich young ruler, will claim to have obeyed this command. They are not guilty of robbing a bank or stealing a car. To do such a thing is to break the law of the land and incurs punishment. But is there more to this command than just breaking the law of the land? What about withholding payment due to another? What about a verbal pledge? What about borrowing and not repaying? What about gambling? What about taxes? What about tipping? What about tithing?

‘Materialism has firm control of the popular mind, and even among men and women with normal moral principles, petty thieving is widely prevalent’ – so wrote one man of the UK where travelling on the train without a ticket is very common.

Taking what is not yours

The prophet Nathan told King David a parable. When a traveller came to visit a rich man, and that rich man wanted to give a feast, what did he do? Rather than take a sheep from his own extensive flock he took the poor man’s one and only lamb to feed his visitor. David was incensed at such oppression and indeed stealing – though guilty himself in another way. Even if the poor man cannot

defend himself or protect his property, God will defend him against the oppression of the rich – the rich who steal what little he has.

But stealing from the rich is not sanctioned under this commandment either. Poverty is no excuse for stealing. Agur was aware that with poverty may come the temptation to steal. He prayed to be kept from poverty *lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God* (Proverbs 30:9). The command is absolute – you shall not steal.

The young clerk found \$250,000. It was not his but he kept it. Later he gave it to the police. No one came forward to claim the money, so it could lawfully have gone to the person who found it. But the police said he had forfeited that right by his intent to keep the money for himself. Abraham did not want the King of Sodom saying ‘I have made Abraham rich’. How shameful to say I am rich because of another man’s loss – and indeed sinful if no attempt is made to return the money to the rightful owner.

She put a dollar into the machine and pulled the handle. Out came hundreds of dollars. Where did all that money come from? From the machine you say. But who put that money in there? Your neighbour! You have money that your neighbour foolishly put into the machine. You did not work to earn that money – it was by chance that you struck the jackpot. Is this ‘loving your neighbour’ as God commands? Should you not feel shame that you have what your neighbour lost – maybe what he/she needed for their family meal.

Some people freely steal things from their employer – private or government. What they are given for work purposes they take for personal use, or use by family and friends. Unless permitted by the employer, this is a breach of the eighth commandment is it not?

What about Achan? He decided to steal from God! During the battle of Jericho he found gold and silver and coveted this treasure. He took it and hid it in his tent. God had specifically instructed the men that all the silver and gold was to be *brought into the treasury of the Lord* (Joshua 6:19). Achan was severely punished for stealing what was dedicated and belonged to the Lord.

Still today some will try stealing from the Lord. We see church and charity funds being embezzled. We see some preachers getting rich and living in luxury – at a standard way beyond that of their flock. Some church leaders feel free to ‘borrow’ church funds for a wedding or the like.

Many who became believers in New Testament times had been accustomed to stealing- amongst other sins (I Corinthians 6:10). They were commanded to steal no longer, but to labour, working with their hands (Ephesians 4:28). Those who had stolen repaid such ill-gotten gain. When Zacchaeus was called by Jesus his life was transformed. As a tax collector he had cheated many people and had become rich. He said to Jesus *if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore it fourfold* (Luke 19:8).

The person who lives to please God will love his neighbour and not cheat him. He will not steal from him directly or indirectly. Not only in Corinth but in many societies down through history the gospel has transformed men and women – indeed whole societies. You may remember when you could go out and leave your house open, when you could leave your car in the street unlocked. For years I literally hugged my camera around India for fear it would be stolen. Eventually it was stolen – from my car at a park in Sydney!

Not giving what is due

Stealing is not only taking what belongs to someone else – it is also failing to give what you owe someone else. Each day you shall give (a person) their wages – failure to do so is sin (Deuteronomy 24:15, Leviticus 19:13). Those who get rich by keeping back the wages of their workers are condemned by God (James 5:4). Those who get rich from money they have borrowed and fail to repay are also guilty of stealing (Leviticus 6:2-7). Under the law in Israel a person who could not repay his debts became a servant of the creditor and worked till he had paid off his debt.

Some people borrow money with no intention of ever repaying. Bad debts cost our society dearly. People will borrow and freely spend, while their neighbour waits patiently to be repaid. Defrauding a person in this way is stealing – it is sin.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's said Jesus (Mark 12:17). He was answering a question about paying taxes. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Not only was it lawful – it was obligatory (Romans 13:7). The coins you have all have the head of Queen Elizabeth on them. They have value because the government so guarantees. So when the government demands a proportion of that money in taxes you must pay. With your taxes they provide services. They maintain a police force and an army to protect you.

And to God the things that are Gods. What did Jesus mean? Why did he add this phrase? The Jews were very astute at avoiding paying their tithe, ten percent of their produce or income to the Lord. *Will a man rob God! Yet you have robbed me – in tithes and offerings...you have robbed me* (Malachi 3:8).

The earth is the Lords and everything in it (Psalm 24:1). Let us remember that whatever we have belongs to the Lord, the giver of every good and perfect gift. *Will he not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing* (Malachi 3:10) – if you will honour and obey him with your tithe.

All you have is the gift of the Lord. You brought nothing into this world. You say 'I worked hard for what I have'. That is great- better that you worked hard than that you got it by gambling or unlawful means. But remember Job – the Lord may take what you think is yours at any moment. It is the Lord who blesses the work of your hands.

And learn to be content with what you have. Do not covet what belongs to your neighbour. It is coveting, the desire to have the things of this world, that leads to stealing. Pay your debts, pay your taxes, pay your tithes and see if the Lord will not bless you. *There will not be room enough to receive the abundance of his blessings.*

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