

Do Not Steal

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Sermon Series:
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 5:19

There's a hole in the moral zone of the American universe, and it's getting bigger all the time!

T rue confession! I stole something from a drug store when I was a boy. I regret having to tell you this as your pastor, but if we are going to talk about stealing, I'd better put everything on the table. For the life of me, I cannot recall what I pilfered. It was something small and inexpensive. What I remember vividly were the pangs of guilt and shame. One bright sunny afternoon, with sweaty palms and rapid heart-beat, I slipped the much-coveted merchandise into my pocket and walked out of the store.

I don't know why I took it. Perhaps the tenth command about coveting comes into play here. I desired it, so I took it. Oh, the shame of it all! I was a thief and I knew it. The guilt was almost more than I could bear. I was certain if I was caught, I'd have to do jail time. I resolved never to do it again.

The eighth command is simple and straightforward—no stealing. Theft in American society has reached epidemic proportions. Every year, four million people are caught shoplifting. Another 35 million people get away with it. Shoplifting costs retailers \$25 billion every year.

Employee theft is growing at a rate of 15 percent each year. Seventy-five percent of all

employees steal at least once from their companies; 40 percent steal twice.

The fastest growing crime in America today is identity theft. Thieves steal people's names, addresses, social security and credit card numbers off the internet. Last year, ten million people became victims of identity theft, costing businesses and financial institutions a staggering 48 billion dollars.

In a national survey among high school students, 75 percent of the students admitted to cheating on tests. More than half plagiarize off the internet. These numbers have been climbing steadily since 1992. Even the best students aren't exempt. Seventy-three percent of honor students cheat.

Folks, there's a hole in the moral zone of the American universe, and it's getting bigger all the time!

We think primarily of theft in material terms. But a far wider range of thievery is called into question in Scripture besides stealing other people's stuff.

The Ten Commandments are ancient laws, yet Jesus taught these commands as still binding on Christians today. The moral laws of the Old Testament, summarized in the Ten Commandments, remain in force.

“Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life.”

John Chrysostom

There are, however, hundreds of civil laws no longer operative for Christians today. Some of these laws are rather arcane, such as wearing two types of fabrics in a garment (Deuteronomy 21:11) or constructing a parapet (wall) around the roof of your home (Deuteronomy 23:8). Yet, these civil laws illustrate the broad scope of issues God cares about when it comes to this commandment.

If you steal something from your neighbor, you are obliged to make double restitution (Exodus 22:4). If your enemy’s livestock goes astray, you must bring it back (Exodus 23:4). You are required to use accurate weights and measurements (Leviticus 19:35-36). You are forbidden to move your neighbor’s boundary stones (Deuteronomy 27:17). You must return by nightfall your servant’s garment, taken as collateral (Deuteronomy 24:12-13). You cannot charge exorbitant rates of interest (Deuteronomy 23:19-20). Biblical laws about lending money to the poor are even more stringent. No-interest loans must be offered to the poor (Exodus 23:25). Habitat for Humanity derives its practice of charging no-interest loans to poor people on the basis of this command. You are forbidden to harvest or glean the corners of your field (Leviticus 23:22). You must not hold back wages from your laborers until morning (Leviticus 19:13). You shall not set your slaves free empty-handed (Deuteronomy 15:13).

You get the picture. Biblical laws are far more expansive than

stealing property. “No stealing” encompasses the complete range of ethical issues that the Bible calls justice!

I am struck by the vast number of civil laws pertaining to the poor and most vulnerable members of society. Strangers, widows and orphans are given special consideration in Biblical law.

John Chrysostom, a 4th century, well-known preacher, articulated the already widely-held Christian belief that “Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life.” Yes, “Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them.”

Martin Luther, on the basis of the eighth command, railed against the inequitable distribution of wealth during the time of the Reformation. Luther said, “One person cheats another with defective merchandise, false measures, dishonest weights, bad coins, and takes advantage by underhanded tricks.... These are called gentlemen swindlers. They sit in office chairs and are called good citizens and, yet, with a great show of legality, they rob and steal. Daily, the poor are being defrauded. New burdens and high prices are imposed. Everyone misuses the market in his own willful, conceited, arrogant way as if it were his right and privilege to sell his goods as dearly as he pleases without a word of criticism.”

Fiorello LaGuardia served as the irrepressible mayor of New York City during the Depression era. One winter’s night in 1935, Mayor

“There is only one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft.”

- from *The Kite Runner*

LaGuardia visited night court in the poorest ward of the city. He dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench. That night, a tattered old woman was charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She was brought before the court. She pleaded guilty, justifying her criminal activity with the words, “My daughter’s husband deserted her. She is sick and her children are starving.”

The shopkeeper refused to drop the charges. “It’s a bad neighborhood, your honor, and she’s got to be punished to teach other people a lesson.” LaGuardia said to the woman, “I’ve got to punish you; the law makes no exceptions. What will it be? Ten dollars or ten days in jail?”

As he pronounced the sentence, LaGuardia took a ten dollar bill from his pocket and placed it in his hat, saying, “Here’s the ten dollar fine, which I now remit, and furthermore, I’m going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.” Forty-seven dollars and fifty cents was turned over to a bewildered old grandmother, who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren.

This eighth command consists of only two words, the imperative “no” and the verb “stealing.” This command also lacks an explicit object. Do not steal what? Do not steal anything that belongs to your neighbor.

In the book *The Kite Runner*, Amir, a young son, asks his father, Baba, about evil. “Amir, you asked about sin and I want to tell you. “Are you listening?”

Yes, Baba,” said the young boy.

“No matter what the Mullah teaches (the Mullah had taught Amir that his father would be made to answer on Judgment Day for the scotch he was sipping as they talked), there is only one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft. Do you understand?”

“No,” the young boy said. Neither do we understand. Most of us reduce stealing to taking other people’s stuff. But the trajectory of this command, as Baba suggests to Amir, is expansive.

We can steal most anything. We can steal someone’s reputation by slander. We can steal someone’s good name by malicious gossip. We can steal from our employers by cheating them of our time. We can steal someone’s heart by dishonesty or manipulation. We can download unauthorized music off the internet. We can lie about kids’ ages to gain entrance into movies or restaurants more cheaply. We can pad our expense accounts or dodge income taxes. Now, I’ve done it! I’ve gone from preaching to meddling!

My purpose today is not to make all of us feel horribly guilty. My central concern is that we not reduce this command to stealing people’s belongings and then say proudly, “Hey, I don’t steal from people; I’ve got it made.” We must be willing to attend to all the

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dimensions of sin this commandment addresses.

“There is one sin, only one,” said Baba, “and that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft. Do you understand?” Yes, now I understand. Any act of stealing, whether it is people’s possessions or reputation or good name is what this command calls stealing.

We preach sermon series at Vienna Presbyterian to maintain continuity and reinforce central Biblical themes. As far as I can tell, this sermon series hasn’t created much of a buzz around our church. I usually receive more feedback on sermons than I have in the past month or so. It could be your pastors are in something of a sermon slump, but I suspect something else is at work within our culture. We live in a society that resists commandments. We don’t like to be told what to do. We want a God that doesn’t make demands on us, who is soft and malleable.

This Biblical God makes demands on us. This Biblical God offers nothing less than all His love and expects nothing less than all our devotion.

Let me take you back to why we talk about sin in the first place. Sin is any thought, word or deed that separates us from God. God’s remedy for sin is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came to save us from our sins. That’s why we call him Savior.

The trajectory of this command is expansive. We have stolen other people’s names and reputations.

Jesus saves us from our thievery. Jesus wasn’t crucified between two murderers or two adulterers, he was executed between two thieves. Although we are petty thieves deserving judgment, when we ask for pardon, Jesus utters the most remarkable words, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

We want a God that doesn't make demands on us.

