

SERIES: Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives

SERMON: **Taking What Doesn't Belong to Us**

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20:15

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DATE: July 26, 2009

In our journey through the Ten Commandments, we are going to deal with the Eighth one today. I invite you to turn in your Bibles to Exodus 20:15: "You shall not steal."

We have a term we like to use for people who violate the Eighth Commandment. We call them kleptomaniacs—people who will steal whatever they can get their hands on—or we just call them thieves. We also have names for those who break the other Commandments. The one who violates the 1st or 2nd we call an idolater, the 3rd is a blasphemer, the 6th is a murderer, the 7th is a philanderer, the 9th is a pathological liar, and so forth. These terms can be useful, but they can also be dangerous. It's easy to feel contemptuous of a kleptomaniac and then view ourselves as innocent by comparison.

What I want to communicate today is that the Eighth Commandment is not just for kleptos. It's for all of us. My greatest task this morning will be to open our eyes to the breadth of actions included under the prohibition found in the Eighth Commandment. We all know it's wrong to hold up a bank or steal a car. But do we as readily recognize other forms of stealing, like taking office supplies home from work or filling their purse with sugar packets from the restaurant or cheating a little on their income taxes. Yet the sin is the same—the sin of taking what doesn't belong to us.

Now it seems to me the very concept of stealing assumes two things—the divine institution of work and the private ownership of property. Obviously we all need food, shelter, and clothing. If these are genuine needs, and if we are not allowed to steal to meet them, then there must be a legitimate way of meeting them. And there is. God has established the primary way as work. In Ephesians 4:28, Paul writes to new converts and tells them, "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." Work provides for our own needs and even helps us provide for others' needs. I have always been amazed at how much creativity, ingenuity and effort some people will put into stealing! If they would put that much into some legitimate kind of endeavor they could easily be millionaires instead of convicts!

The eighth commandment also assumes private ownership of property. Socialists and capitalists have been fighting for much of the past century over whether property should belong to the state or the individual. I would clearly lean toward the capitalist arguments, but the extremists in both camps would be better served to recognize that owning property is neither sin nor an inalienable right, but a loan, a trust from God.¹ And if God has entrusted some property to one person, it is stealing for someone else to take it without permission.

I want to begin by observing that the size of a theft does not determine whether it violates the Eighth Commandment.

Taking things either large or small is stealing.

In society we distinguish between felony theft and misdemeanor theft, depending upon the value

of the items stolen. If you steal a car, it's going to be a felony and you're going to prison. If you steal a cell phone, it's probably going to be a misdemeanor, unless maybe it's a fancy I-Phone, and you'll probably get slapped on the wrist. But that distinction is just a legal nicety we use to keep our jails from overflowing.

In God's economy it's all stealing, and we have no right to excuse stealing just because the item is of relatively little value. Using company stamps for personal mail is stealing. Making personal long distance calls from work is stealing. Evading customs duties on items brought in from abroad is stealing. Sneaking your six-year-old into an event that is free for children 5 and under without paying is stealing. Failing to tell a checker at the grocery store when he or she rings up an item at a lower price than it should be is stealing. Ripping off items from a hotel is stealing. One hotel in its first year of business had to replace 38,000 spoons, 18,000 tiles, 355 coffee pots, and even 100 Bibles!ⁱⁱ

But it's not just consumers who steal. Merchants sometimes adjust their scales just a little to give them an advantage over the customer. That way the customer pays for a full pound but maybe only receives 15 ounces. It's such a small thing that no one really gets hurt (so he thinks), and over the long haul it saves the merchant a lot of money. But it is stealing. I recently read an article about gas stations fudging on their pumps so that they don't quite give the customer the full amount of gas for which they pay. While each individual transaction is small, it adds up to tens of millions of dollars over time. And it's stealing.

It's interesting how often the Scriptures speak of the necessity of using just scales and balances and measurements. Listen, for example, to Deut. 25:13-15 (The Message):

Don't carry around with you two weights, one heavy and the other light, and don't keep two measures at hand, one large and the other small. Use only one weight, a true and honest weight, and one measure, a true and honest measure, so that you will live a long time on the land that God, your God, is giving you. Dishonest weights and measures are an abomination to God, your God—all this corruption in business deals.

Taking things either tangible or intangible is stealing.

Children, tangible things are things you can touch; intangible are things that are not visible but they are nevertheless real and valuable. Some people who would never steal a piece of equipment (that's tangible) from their employer have little conscience against stealing time (that's intangible) by calling in sick when they're not, taking longer lunch hours than allowed, or playing solitaire or surfing the internet on the company computer.

I was shocked by the behavior of the union workers who built our beautiful worship center in St. Louis. They would routinely drive off 20 minutes before closing time. One day the foreman went up to a group that had extended their break from fifteen minutes to a half hour on a day when they were earning double pay and politely suggested they get back to work. They cursed him violently and walked off the job, threatening to shut down the job site because of harassment. That is stealing, pure and simple.

Patterson and Kim, in a book entitled, *The Day America Told the Truth*, wrote:

*. . . the so-called Protestant ethic is long gone from today's American workplace. Workers around America frankly admit that they spend more than 20 percent of their time (seven hours a week) at work goofing off. That amounts to a four-day work week across the nation. Almost half of Americans admit to chronic malingerin, calling in sick when not sick, and doing it regularly. . . . Only one in four gives work their best effort.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Some experts estimate that as much as one-third of the cost of the average product goes to cover the various forms of stealing that occur on its way to the marketplace.

Blue collar workers, of course, are not the only ones guilty of stealing from their employers in intangible ways. White collar workers (i.e. professionals who work in offices) who purchase a more expensive airfare in order to get frequent flyer miles on their favorite airline are stealing. Those who copy software from one computer to another are stealing. Those who trade stocks on inside information are stealing. Those who engage in false advertising and deceptive packaging are stealing. One of the most damaging forms of theft is relatively recent, at least in its extent—and that is identity theft.

I have even known pastors and church workers to steal, believe it or not—by violating copyrights on music, or plagiarizing someone else's sermon, or playing golf instead of attending meetings when they go to a conference paid for by the church. And when confronted with their stealing they can become very self-righteous and indignant, rationalizing their behavior through all sorts of contortions. But it is still stealing.

About ten years ago I discovered a series of sermons on a well-known evangelical church's website—sermons that turned out to be plagiarized from a published book that I happened to be reading at the same time I was listening to the sermons. Page after page was virtually identical, with no attribution of the rightful author. I wrote a respectful letter to the elders of the church and the pastor wrote a very nice letter of confession, apology, and submission to the discipline of his elders. .

But several years later I noticed that the sermon series, with no changes, was still on his church's website, with no acknowledgment of the rightful owner of the material. Interestingly, at the end of each sermon is this notice: "This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of . . ." and then there is the name of the plagiarizer.

Another form of intangible stealing that is extremely serious is the stealing of a child's innocence by someone who seduces the child into sin. Jesus said, "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin" (Luke 17:1-2). It is also possible to steal someone's reputation through malicious gossip. That is also intangible but very real and very hurtful.

Taking things from either “good guys” or “bad guys” is stealing.

Robin Hood was famous for stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, but that doesn't make it right. Those perceived as the “bad guys” today might be the IRS or a fancy store that charges outrageous prices or just someone we don't like. That doesn't make any difference. What makes the taking of something stealing is not who owned it, but the fact that it was taken without permission and without paying for it. *The Sting* was a classic movie in which the heroes ripped off a gambling syndicate which was in turn ripping off its customers. There's something in all of us that likes to see crooks get theirs, but stealing is not right just because the victims themselves are crooked.

Consider what Titus 2:9-10 says about stealing from bad guys: “Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.” Who is worse than a slave owner? Yet not even slaves are justified in stealing from their owners.

Taking things from “little guys” or “big guys” is stealing.

There is a perception out there that insurance companies are fare game because they are so big. They charge such outrageous premiums and they have so much money that it's OK to inflate one's claims and get some money back that way. But frankly, the main reason premiums are so high is that too many people think that way. The amount of insurance fraud going on in this country is astronomical. We like to point to the corruption in third-world countries, but I doubt if there's a third-world country anywhere on the planet that could match the fraud that takes place in just this one industry in the U.S., the insurance industry.

The government is another entity which people routinely steal from because it's so big. But the government has no independent income. It gets its money from us. So when one steals from the government, he is in effect stealing from his neighbors. But the attitude seems to be, “Everyone is doing it, so if I don't get a piece of the action, I'm going to end up getting the short end of the stick.” It's stealing, whether from little guys or big guys.

Taking things by force or by fraud is stealing.

Our society tends to denounce theft by force, which is often used by the poor, and excuse theft by fraud, which is often employed by the rich. In Roman law a poor thief was punished by crucifixion, but a successful politician was rewarded by being given a province to loot for his personal advantage. Dante would disagree with this state of affairs, for he placed swindlers deeper in hell than armed robbers. And I think the Scripture would also disagree. If you study the Psalms, the Proverbs, and the Prophets, I think you will find they condemn the dishonest rich more strongly and more often than the desperate poor. It doesn't excuse stealing by the poor, mind you, but it certainly puts the spotlight on white collar crime.

Taking things illegally or even “legally” can be stealing.

Obviously most theft is illegal. Some, however, is legal but still violates God’s laws. I think of the pork barrel spending that is so common in Congress. It’s legal but immoral—stealing from the public treasury to ensure one’s re-election. Certain restrictive building codes and zoning laws amount to legal theft. In many communities you can’t build on a vacant piece of property you own without deeding a section of your land to the city in case they ever need to widen the road in front. Mind you, they don’t pay you for that land; they steal it.

I think the graduated income tax in our country is close to becoming legal theft. When 65% of the income taxes are paid by 10% of the people, and when 50% pay almost nothing (many, in fact, are receiving taxes instead of paying them), that is approaching the immoral. And current congressional plans are going to make it a lot worse. Those politicians are well aware that the 50% who are not paying anything provide enough votes to re-elect them, and they themselves are protected by absurdly generous salaries, pensions, and health plans that they have voted for themselves. It’s all legal, but I think it is immoral.

Gambling is legal in many places in our country, but I think a solid argument can be made that it is legal theft. When the gambler loses, he is stealing from his family or from the Lord. When he wins, he is stealing from the poor suckers who lose.

Another legal way of stealing in our country is borrowing beyond one’s ability to repay and then declaring bankruptcy. I know a man who took advantage of the credit card applications that came to his home and ordered dozens of cards. He ran up \$125,000 in credit card debt and then declared bankruptcy. Friends, that was theft—just as much as if he had gone out and held up the banks that issued those cards. I have known people to borrow from friends or family and not repay. They don’t have to declare bankruptcy (because family and friends generally don’t press charges), but it’s stealing, nevertheless.

Taking things from God or man is stealing.

The stealing we have talked about so far is taking things from other people or human institutions. But do you realize that we can also steal from God? Some of you are probably saying, “Pastor, you could have gone a long time without bringing that up,” but friends, in Malachi 3 the Lord uses some very strong language to address the giving of His people. Here’s what God Himself says:

“Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How do we rob you? In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me.’”

There is a stewardship scandal in the lives of many in the contemporary church today. They steal time from God due to self-centered lifestyles. They withhold talents from Christ’s service because their priorities are screwed up. And they hoard treasures that are rightly God’s.

Time, talents, and treasures—all stolen. I am absolutely convinced that no job in the church would ever go begging and no financial need would ever go unmet if it weren't that Christians are stealing from God.

And the saddest thing about it is that it is so self-defeating. The fact is some people's poverty is due specifically to their failure to give as they should. Now I know that sounds contradictory to the human perspective. Poverty caused by not giving away enough money? Exactly! You can read about it in Haggai, chapter 1. But the other side of the story is that failure to give as we should prevents God from opening the floodgates. The very next words God speaks in Malachi are these: "'Test me in this,' says the LORD Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.'" The problem is we don't believe what God says here. We would rather have the security of our stolen money than the security God offers us.

So far we have examined a number ways in which people steal:

- Taking things either large or small that don't belong to us is stealing.
- Taking things either tangible or intangible is stealing.
- Taking things from either "good guys" or "bad guys" is stealing.
- Taking things by force or by fraud is stealing.
- Taking things illegally or even "legally" can be stealing.
- Taking things from God or man is stealing.

Now I don't want to offend you, but I'm going to make the assumption that I'm talking to a bunch of thieves here this morning. Actually I have that on pretty good authority. Martin Luther wrote, "If we look at mankind in all its conditions, it is nothing but a vast, wide stable full of great thieves." He also speculated what would happen if we were all brought to justice. "If we're to hang them all, where shall we get rope enough?"

Now I realize that there are some notable exceptions, hopefully many right here in this room, to Martin Luther's blanket condemnation. I know that some believers are extremely conscientious about theft. But I also know that many are careless. Maybe you have not committed felony theft, but by God's reckoning you have stolen *something*, and you're feeling some measure of conviction, and you're wondering how to rectify it. Let me address the issue of the path of forgiveness.

There is a path of forgiveness for those who have stolen:

Stop now! If you are currently engaged in stealing, stop today! If you are embezzling money from your job, stop today! If you are taking office supplies home from work, stop today! If you are failing to give your employer a full day's work for a full day's pay, stop today! Whatever you might be doing which amounts to taking what doesn't belong to you, stop. Stop because it can eventually land you before a judge and maybe in jail. Stop because it will ruin your relationships with others. Stop because it leads to deception and many other sins (for example, it's almost impossible to find a thief who isn't also a liar). Stop because it places extra

burdens on other people. Stop because it hinders the work of God. Stop for your own sake, for the owner's sake, and for God's sake.

But it's not enough just to stop.

Confess to God, and to the person or institution wronged. This is tough, but it may be the only way to find real spiritual freedom. Without doubt we need to admit to God what we have done. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." But you may also need to admit to the one from whom you have stolen. You may think it will destroy your reputation, but more than likely it will actually enhance it. Go to the store manager where you have shoplifted and tell him exactly what you have taken. Go to your boss and confess that you owe him for sick time you took when you weren't sick. Children, go to your parents and tell them what you have stolen. I can almost guarantee you that they will forgive you and help you make better decisions in the future.

But it's still not enough to stop and to confess.

Make restitution, if possible. And it generally is possible. It is not possible to make restitution after committing murder, but it is possible to make restitution after stealing, and the Bible has a lot to say about that. Listen to Ezekiel 33:14-16:

And if I say to the wicked man, "You will surely die," but he then turns away from his sin and does what is just and right—if he gives back what he took in pledge for a loan, returns what he has stolen, follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live; he will not die. None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he will surely live.

At the very least the thief should give back everything that has been stolen— whether it's money or time or possessions. In some cases one needs to give back *more* than was stolen because of the time value of money. If you stole ten dollars in 1960, that would be worth at least \$100 today. If you borrowed \$1000 in 1980, you would need to repay at least \$3000 today. That's just to remain even.

But in addition, the Scriptures often speak of a penalty for theft. In the story of Zaccheus, the tax collector who came to Jesus and repented (Luke 19), he seems to have recognized the need to pay a penalty, for he offered to pay back anyone he had cheated four times the amount taken. I don't think that's an across-the-board requirement (perhaps Zaccheus did it because he had gotten so wealthy on the stolen money), but it may be something to consider.

If for one reason or another you can't confess a theft to your victim, you can still make restitution anonymously. The Conscience Fund was created in 1811 by the United States Department of the Treasury and is used for voluntary contributions from people who have stolen from or defrauded the United States Government. Donations to the Conscience Fund vary in size and reason. A 9 cent donation was made by a person from Massachusetts who had reused a 3 cent postage stamp, while a person from Jersey City sent \$40,000 in several installments for

\$8,000 he had previously taken. Other contributions are forwarded by clergy who have received deathbed confessions. Unfortunately, the sincerity of some donors' repentance is less than stellar, as demonstrated by a letter reading, "Dear Internal Revenue Service, I have not been able to sleep at night because I cheated on last year's income tax. Enclosed find a cashier's check for \$1,000. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the balance."

Perhaps churches should have a Conscience Fund. Frankly, friends, I suspect that if every Christian were to repay all that has been stolen from God, local churches would not only not have deficits; they would have to work overtime to decide how to spend all the money wisely.

Conclusion: Jerry Bridges has observed that there are three basic attitudes we can take toward possessions. The first says, "What's your is mine; I'll take it." This is the attitude of the thief. The second says, "What's mine is mine; I'll keep it." And since we are selfish by nature, this is the attitude that most people demonstrate most of the time. But there is a third option, and that is the godly attitude that says, "What's mine is God's; I'll share it." That's the attitude of a godly believer who takes the Eighth Commandment seriously.

When a believer refrains from stealing, (even when it's easy to get by with it, even when everyone else seems to be doing it), and when he begins to share the blessings he has received from God, then he has earned the right to share his faith and tell people about Jesus, who makes sinful people right with God when they put their trust in Him.

i. Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain*, Westminster Press, 1974, 100, writes to both camps, . . . *owning capital and employing labor are not theft, unless we fail to treat the laborer as worthy of his hire; thus making a profit is not theft, unless we make it by . . . defrauding others; thus taxation is not theft, unless the government fails to return to us, in services and benefits and protection, the equivalent of what it takes away. And thus, before extending a blanket condemnation or a blanket approval to any of these three, we had better take the trouble to find out how they are working in practice.*

ii. Philip Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, 652

iii. Michael G. Moriarty, *The Perfect Ten*, Zondervan, 1999, 164.