

The Big Ten: Hands Off!

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October 25, 2014

Proverbs 30:8-9; Matthew 6:24-33; Deuteronomy 5:1-21

Friends, our final Scripture reading is from Deuteronomy 5:1-21, the second giving of the Ten Commandments of God. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to pull out the study notes from your bulletin. Let's listen to the Word of God. "Moses summoned all Israel and said: "Hear, O Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. (At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he 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. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor's house or land, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.""

Are we for theft or against it? I grew up watching the Disney version of *Robin Hood*, with a clever fox as Robin Hood and an evil wolf as the Sherriff of Nottingham. "Rob the rich and give to the poor." The thief was the hero of the story, and we loved it. We feel for Jean Valjean, the hero of *Les Miserables*, sentenced to years of hard labor for stealing a loaf of bread. We're deeply moved when a kind priest gives Jean Valjean the silver he was caught stealing.

But outlook changes our view. I don't think anybody celebrates it, but the Post Office didn't deliver mail on Columbus Day. In 35 years, Christopher Columbus has gone from hero to villain, even though the central facts of what he did have never been in dispute. Was Columbus discoverer of a great new world or a thief of people and property? Maybe both. Maybe it's who tells the story. And theft is never fine when it's our stuff being stolen. That changes perspective.

God weighs in on the matter throughout the law He gave to Israelites, and He does so particularly through the eighth commandment. We might be surprised to find that the American justice system's view of theft is not a particularly biblical one – and that while we may never pocket anything from the 7-11, we need to expand our horizons as to what theft is and how Jesus calls us beyond the letter of the command to take care of our neighbors.

The eighth commandment, like the two before it, is blunt in Hebrew: “never steal.” It's simply about taking any physical property that doesn't belong to you. The word in Hebrew includes the idea of intentional deception – if you deceive someone else in a transaction in order to get ahead, it qualifies. It violates our relationship with God and others when we take things from them without asking permission.

God's law acknowledges that we can own material possessions. God never commands communal living. The Jerusalem church shared everything they had for a while, and it was great until they wound up giving everything away and had to get donations from other churches just to survive. Fallen human nature doesn't mean that we can't share, but that sharing requires ownership. I'm not a huge fan of Raffi, but his children's song got it right – “It's mine, but you can have some – with you I'd like to share it.”

But God has a very different viewpoint than we do about property, shown by the Old Testament laws for punishing theft. If a thief took something, he was to pay it back double. The thief lost the same amount he hoped to gain. The penalty grew if life of any kind was harmed. If someone stole an animal and killed it, they had to pay it back four or five fold. The only kind of theft that invoked the death penalty was kidnapping – stealing someone's life for your own gain.

Compare that to the pagan societies around Israel. There, murder could be covered by a large fine, but theft? Theft was the huge offense. Thieving could get you the death penalty; you might get off easy and just lose a hand or a foot, which would destroy your livelihood and mark you for life. The other nations valued property more than life, especially the lives of slaves. God turns that around and says nothing, not even property, has the same value as a human life – only when you steal life is your life forfeit.

This should make us think twice about our legal system. Is prison the right answer? I've known folks locked up for several years for theft on top of fines well over double what they took. How can you pay back something when you have no means to earn money? Is the prison system trying to administer justice or extract vengeance? Which system do we look more like – the pagan system or the system God established? The law of God makes us reconsider our priorities.

At the same time, while theft is not the greatest crime we can commit, because it appears in the Ten Words from God, it is an offense against God and against others. Theft harms our relationships with others because we lose our sense of trust. If you've ever been robbed or know someone who has, you know that a theft makes you leery not only of the thief but of everyone – who else shouldn't I trust? Theft not only takes away property, it takes away our sense of security. Our security comes from God, not from our possessions – but God knows our relationships with others require confidence that they aren't going to steal from us. Even if the punishment isn't as harsh as we would make it, it's a big deal.

Tonight, I want us to do some big picture thinking about theft. I sincerely doubt any of us here today are shoplifters. If we have an item we borrowed from someone, we had permission to take it – and if we’ve held onto it for too long, we still have plans to give it back. Theft is not a way of life for anyone here as far as I know. But theft is bigger than simply stealing off the rack or breaking into someone’s house to take their stereo.

The Old Testament law goes through a ton of ways that we’re to be honest in our dealings with one another and not steal from each other. Some of them are surprising, and many of them hit us right where we live today, often at direct odds with our society. Here are just a few, mostly found in Exodus 22-23 and Leviticus 19 and 25:

- You’re not to charge anyone but the foreigner interest on anything you loan them – and when you do charge interest to the foreigner, it’s not to be at oppressive rates. So much for payday loans and credit cards that exploit people’s need for money at exorbitant rates.
- You can keep something in pledge of a loan, but you have to give that item back whenever the needy person needs it, even if that’s every day. So much for the pawn shop that requires payment in full to get back an item and often winds up owning it because the owner can’t pay back the loan in time.
- We’re not to oppress the needy, widows, or orphans – we’re not to take advantage of their underprivileged state – and we’re not to defraud the worker. How does it look that first world countries like the United States pay folks overseas in the third world pennies to make all sorts of goods for us because they’re desperate for a job? How does that affect employers who put their workers on “salary” and then wind up paying far below minimum wage by working them non-stop? Or stores that pay far less to their workers than they should simply because they can? And how does that look when we stiff a waitress on her tip?
- Weights and measures are to be “perfect” so no one gets a raw deal. We may have the weights and measures down to a science, but how many of you go get a soda that’s supposed to be 32 ounces and you get 10 ounces of drink and 22 ounces of ice? You go buy gas and it’s always sold at 99/100ths of a cent. We weigh exactly yet still attempt to deceive.
- There’s no “finders keepers” in Scripture – if an animal finds its way onto your property, you are responsible for returning it to the owner. I know one of our members this week found a nice cell phone and immediately called the gal who lost it. That’s the way God intended for us to deal with others’ property. How many of us have lost something important for twenty seconds and it’s gone forever?
- You aren’t ever to bribe anyone to get a better deal for yourself. This week Governor Snyder signed a bill that both Democrats and Republicans supported that cut off Tesla Motors, a small electric car company, from selling their cars in Michigan directly to consumers without having car dealers and showrooms and salesmen. That’s big money in action – the Goliaths of the car industry trying to take away David’s sling. It just made me mad. Bribery is huge in other countries – missionaries often have a very hard time operating throughout the world because bribery is a way of life. Here, it just goes higher up the food chain.

- You can walk through your neighbor's vineyard or field and eat enough to satisfy your hunger right now, but you aren't to take any home for later. On the same side, when you harvest what you have, you can do it thoroughly, but you're not to go back through and pick the fields clean – you're to leave whatever was missed the first time for the poor and hungry to go through and glean. What would this mean for the poor in our nation – for people to actually intentional leave something behind for them? What might it mean for us, when we go to the store and buy four shirts, to buy a fifth to give to the Salvation Army? What might it mean for us to buy four cans of green beans and a fifth for the food pantry?
- In the Old Testament, there's no such thing as a credit score – Scripture says to lend to the needy precisely because he is needy and may not be able to pay you back. Our nation's economy and the credit of hundreds of thousands of Americans was slammed by banks loaning out tons of money on homes to those who couldn't afford those mortgages and then destroying their credit when they couldn't pay them back. Americans got greedy – both the people who wanted big homes and the banks who saw big dollar signs.

At the same time, we get mad when people don't pay us back. Some of you know that back at Church of the Covenant, the deacons occasionally made gifts and loans to folks who were in need. Sometimes they got paid back, sometimes they didn't, even when the family got out of financial trouble. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said there was no credit with God if we lent to others expecting repayment. He said even the sinners who don't honor God loan money to each other expecting to be repaid. He said to lend money to your *enemies* expecting nothing in return. Talk about turning our expectations on their heads.

- And here's one that would make Chase and Citibank go nuts – every seven years, by the old law, you're to forgive all your debts and start fresh. It goes even deeper. Every fifty years, purchased lands were supposed to revert to their original owners so that everyone in Israel had their ancestral lands back, and all servants and slaves were to be set free. This was such a radical idea, we don't have any record of it officially happening in Israel. God said that one reason for the exile was for the land to have its jubilees – its years of the forgiveness of debts that the Israelites failed to give.
- Perhaps the biggest one of all – we aren't to rob God. There were times in Israel's history when the priests and their families were starving because the people stopped giving their tithes and offerings to God. In Malachi 1, God condemns the people for vowing to give the best of their flocks but then giving the one that's sick instead. Later on, Malachi 3, God calls the nation of Israel cursed for how they failed to give Him His due. Some of you have been incredibly generous to the church and to other Christian causes. I'm grateful for that. But how many of us give what's left over out of our paycheck or our pension?

The Bible doesn't have categories for certain kinds of theft that we have now. Nobody had the concept of intellectual property, and there was no idea of corporations and guilt on that scale. There were no novels or films or recorded music or television shows that could be pirated on the Internet. There was no 1040 form on which you could cheat on your taxes. But just researching it this week was exhausting as it was. There's no end of the ways we can take what doesn't belong to us.

Thankfully, we can be glad because our relationship with God is through Jesus and not through meticulous lawkeeping. When we think about everything we own, from the clothes in our closets to the electronics in our pockets, we realize we may have done someone wrong, especially in a world where we have no contact with folks who make our gadgets and our garments. An obsession with it can paralyze us – how can we make sure that everything we ever do and every purchase we make is fair and balanced and not theft in some way?

Jesus changes the paradigm. He showed us that the spirit of the law goes deeper than the letter. How do we keep the spirit of “never steal” and live in the real world? Here are two suggestions that follow the Scripture. We can be scrupulously honest in our dealings with others, protecting their rights and properties, while at the same time holding loosely to what we own.

I don't know anyone here today who has any control over who makes most of the stuff we own. But we have control over how we buy things. We can choose businesses that have a track record of paying their employees well. We can make sure to tip. We should be leery of getting something for nothing. We shouldn't get the best deal at the expense of someone else. It's great if we are careful with our money as long as we aren't shorting others because we're a skinflint. Honesty characterizes our business dealings. We charge what's fair. We don't steal from our employer by slacking off on the job. We act above reproach.

We also know that not everybody is great at managing their money and property. When we can, we come to their defense. A while back, several families went to a presentation on fire safety that turned into a company pitch for hugely overpriced fire protection. We did the research and then informed everybody so they didn't get taken. We are family – brothers and sisters in faith – and we watch out for each other as family; we aren't in church to boost our business or profit; we protect each other. It's not rigid law-following; it's acting out of a strong character based on the character of our Lord that we find as we study Scripture.

While we are always looking out for our neighbor, we hold on to our own things loosely. God is the ultimate owner of our stuff. How do we use it for the benefit of His Kingdom? We aren't asking to be taken advantage of, but we aren't going to worry about getting taken. If a loan isn't paid back, it's God's money, not ours. He has more. Paul argued it was better for us to be wronged than to take a fellow believer into court.

Should we let people ransack our homes? No. But we take a godly view of wealth. God gives it to us for our enjoyment and the benefit of others. It's not to rule our hearts so that theft would make us vengeful. Jesus taught us to be wildly generous with those who would take our stuff – if someone demands your coat, give him your shirt too. Nothing we own is as important as our relationship with Christ.

We've only got two commandments left – but each one has shown us the goodness of God's law, our inability to keep it, and the grace shown to us in the gift of Jesus Christ. When we are in relationship with Him, we begin to recognize that everything good in this world belongs to Him, and being gracious with what He's given us brings Him glory. When we live the eighth commandment out, the world around us will see in us the generosity and honesty and abundance of God.