

Just Don't Steal - Anything

Exodus 20:15

Cradock Presbyterian Church

November 4, 2012

What's the worst thing you could steal? I think it'd have to be a person, right? You might be surprised to know that most if not all scholars think that's what the original commandment was about - kidnapping. "Stealing" a person. Of course, in their society, it wasn't like it is in ours. People today get kidnapped for one thing: ransom money. Unless it's some kind of jihad thing, and they get kidnapped to become hostages. In that case we'd just call that hostage-taking. But in the time of the Commandments, there were lots of reasons for "stealing" a person. You might want to add to your family. Yeah, they did that! Especially with women. Need a bride for junior, over there in the corner, breathing out of his mouth? Steal one of the girls out of that caravan comin' down the road. You might be looking for cheap labor, as in slave labor. Grab one of those guys! Happened all the time. If you wanted to get rid of the head of a powerful army or tribe, you might just send spies out at night, and "steal" the guy! And maybe he'd end up dead, which would make it murder, but most likely he'd be a bargaining chip, for a treaty. So yeah, maybe this commandment did mean kidnapping.

But there's a reason it got expanded to mean stealing, as in *theft*. Look at the word *steal*. Then look at the word *stealth*. You notice any similarities? You ought to. This isn't about *robbery*, where people show up in your face with weapons and take your stuff. This is about doing it by *stealth*, secretly, in a hidden way. The only thing it has in common with robbery is that it's taking something that doesn't belong to you. It's worse, in a way, because you can fight off a robber, maybe even subdue him, and lead him

away to jail. How can you do that to someone who operates in the shadows? Who isn't even brave enough to show his or her face?

But we can protect ourselves nowadays. We can etch or stamp our social security numbers onto things and register 'em with the police. We can put LoJack or On Star in our cars, and they even have a version of that now for our computers! We can install security for our homes, with cameras so good that the pictures convict people in court. And we have insurance that pays for anything we lose to theft. Yeah, we got our "stuff" covered. We always take care of our "stuff."

"Stuff" isn't the only thing that can get stolen. And it might not even be the most important thing that gets stolen, either. People take things that aren't theirs that aren't "things" but are important. That's exactly in the spirit of the original commandment, which might have been about something else besides simple larceny. Because the spirit of this commandment is: don't deceive others for your own gain.

Is it stealing when we claim credit for something and we don't deserve it? And maybe somebody else does? Credit doesn't belong to us. And it might mean something important to the person who doesn't get it. It's deceptive because it makes us look like something we're not – and maybe makes someone else look like less than they really are.

Is it stealing when we take the good gifts that God has given us, and use them to enrich ourselves, instead of using them to hasten the coming of God's Kingdom, to spread the Good News of God's presence amongst us and his salvation for all of us? The gifts we have, don't they really belong to God, and they're just loaned to us to use

for a while? If we're not using them to do God's work, then isn't this like taking them away from God and keeping them for ourselves? Is it really theft when we hold back the things we ought to give – like our time, or our tithes, or our prayers – for whatever reason? Isn't this really stealing from God? God deserves all those things. They're really his. Aren't we breaking this commandment when we hold them back? See, that's us being deceptive again. God deserves the credit – but we're claiming it. We're making ourselves out to be better than we really are. We ought to be making God out to be the ultimate God.

So you thought this was going to be kinda cut and dried. Since when is anything God says easy?

Here's another way of looking at it: what is important to you? Therefore, what do you think is important to your fellow human beings? If you know that, *then don't take those things away from them!* Don't do it actively, or by deception. If you do, then God will hold you liable. It's interesting to read what Leviticus says about penalties for stealing or cheating people in material things. The assumption is that there is a goal in mind: make everything right again. The way you did that was to restore to the cheated person the amount that was stolen or cheated, and add one-fifth to it. Then the perpetrator had to offer up an unblemished calf or some other livestock to God as a sin-offering. How would God tell us to go about restoring things when the stealing is of non-material things? I'm not talking about amounts. I can't! – there aren't any amounts to talk about. I think we have to emphasize *restoring*. Because what's important is the restoring of the relationships – between people, and with God. And you have to start

with that basic fact of *deception*; what has to be restored is *trust*. Trust has to be restored between people. If deception has stolen away trust – well, then everything is out of kilter. No wonder “do not steal” made the list!

So what is most important to you – things? Stature? Power? Or people? How about God? Be careful what you want to own. Take stock of what you already have. Don't worry about what you don't have, because you just might not need it; and if you obsess about it, you might end up in trouble. You might try to deceive someone to get some *thing* that you don't really need. And once trust is broken, well...

There's a reason we read that passage from Jesus in the 6th chapter of Matthew. You can consider these instructions as insurance against wanting to steal. It's a short passage, it's worth hearing again:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

If the things you have and the things you want are in heaven, *you will never have a need or a desire to steal*. Or, for that matter, to deceive. So if you can set your mind on the things of God; if you can remember to think about what God wants, and not just what you want; and if you can take these words of Jesus to heart and let them be your

guide to life in this world – then you'll be just one step closer to the life God has in mind for you and for me.