

“LIVING GOD’S WAY – 9) KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF!”

Exodus 20:15; Malachi 3:6-12

I’m sure that all of us here have had experience of this commandment, in that we have had something stolen from us at some time or other. It may have been something almost inconsequential – an eraser from your desk at school; something of little value, but greatly cherished – a set of clockwork false teeth that I used in teaching was taken from my desk; something totally useless to anyone else, but a real inconvenience to you – we were burgled twice in London and it was real hassle getting my cash-cards sorted out; something of great value – soon after we were married our car was stolen (and we were rather hoping that it would stay that way as it was worth more to us stolen than in our garage!).

This is a commandment that is very much at the heart of our own contemporary judicial system, no doubt because of the tremendous emphasis we put on property today. Indeed, so great is this emphasis that very often the penalties for theft and violation of property are much stiffer than the penalties for crimes against the person – which certainly says something about where our priorities lie.

But we must recognise, as we have done in the past few weeks when looking at some of the other commandments here, that our obligation as followers of Jesus Christ, and as men and women made in the image of God, must go much further than a simple adherence to criminal law. Although we may all say that we have had experience of theft as a victim, we may feel that we are innocent of the crime ourselves. But are we? How many of us can actually say that we have never stolen anything. And I’m not just talking about the fact that at the age of ten I stole a free compass from a packet of Bird’s Custard Powder when I was running errands for an old lady down the street – something that has been a burden to my conscience to this very day. It would be very difficult in today’s complex and intricate system of economic activity to say that we are all totally guiltless as far as stealing goes.

When God gave these Ten Commandments to Israel through Moses, things seemed a good deal more simple than they are today. The people who first received the Law were nomadic peasants and had very few possessions. By and large, what they did have was utterly necessary for their survival. They wouldn’t have accumulated much as slaves in Egypt and if they were going to spend forty years wandering around the desert on foot, they didn’t want to have to cart a piano and several trunks full of party frocks around with them. Their tools, clothes, flocks (not frocks!) and so on were indispensable, so to have something stolen could mean death, injury or severe deprivation. It’s fairly understandable, then, that the penalties for stealing (which we read about in *Exodus 22:1-4*) were pretty severe.

Today, though, as we have said, things are more complicated. Of course, we can still go and steal actual property or money – now you can even steal an identity – but there are many other ways in which we can be implicated in stealing which maybe we never really think about, but which can be just as deplorable because they end up depriving people one way or another.

We must first come to accept, however, that the world in which we live and everything in that world is given to us by God. We are the **stewards** of it, rather than the **owners** of it. As we look at *Genesis 1:27,28*, we find that the earth was given to humankind to “*rule over*”, to manage rather than to own. In one sense, then, we hold all things in common.

But to accomplish our task effectively we need to take some things as our own, to have more or less exclusive use of them – tools, homes, seeds and fruit, etc. That doesn’t justify grabbing all that we can or holding things so exclusively that we cannot or will not share them. That’s the principle behind the Law of Jubilee in *Leviticus 25*. We cannot say, with Adam Smith, that property is something intrinsically good, and as we are constantly being told by his contemporary disciples in government, that producing wealth is the most laudable human activity there is. Nor, on the other hand – I have to say this as someone told me that I only ever put one side of the argument – can we say with the French political

thinker Prudhon that “*Property is theft.*” (That’s why socialists drink all those funny tea bags, because they believe that proper tea is theft!) Nor with Karl Marx that private property is intrinsically evil.

The principle at stake is that God has provided all things for the use and enjoyment of all men and women, but for that to be effective, there must be some things that are for the exclusive use of individual people. Stealing is that which violates that principle and takes away from individuals or groups of people those things that are necessary for their livelihood and quality of life. So let’s look at some areas where there are real traps in our contemporary world.

1. TAX EVASION

The Bible is very clear that we have an obligation to the community to pay our tribute, or taxes. There are many services that are provided for us by national and local government for which funds must be provided. Mrs Thatcher was always very resolute in saying, when asked what the government was going to do about some funding or other, that the government has no money: it is the people’s money. (“The people’s money” sounds more like her new Labour clone, actually.) There are those in our society who are disadvantaged and must be provided for, so those of us who have more than we need are encouraged – or, rather, required – to make a contribution. In the Old Testament period a certain amount was given to the priests, who provided a service to the whole community and needed their livelihood provided for. Difficulties arose when the priests themselves became greedy and took more than they needed, however.

By the time of the New Testament, the Roman government was also demanding taxes for the secular state authorities – a system widely abused by the collectors who had bought the tax-collecting franchises (again, just like today) and Zacchaeus was one such person. Both Jesus and Paul are very clear that it is our duty as Christian citizens to pay up when it comes to taxes – look at *Matthew 22:15-22* or *Romans 13:6,7*. We must be very careful that we don’t fall into the trap of holding back from the state (and, consequently, from those who most need help) that which is their due. Lewis Smedes, who wrote a very helpful book on the Ten Commandments called *Mere Morality*, says, “*One yearns for the days when a thief was mere rogue, not an executive in a three piece suit.*” I suspect there are many who fall into that category who are not necessarily executives in three piece suits!

2. PILFERING AND FIDDLING

This is probably an even greater temptation for many people: walking off with those little odds and ends from the office or the workshop or the stationery cupboard. Sally once worked for a head teacher whose garage was full of carpets, stationery and equipment that had been ordered for the school. (She is now happily married to a defrocked Anglican priest who became a URC minister!) It doesn’t seem much at the time, does it? But think how those biros, those notebooks, those odd bits of wood accumulate if everyone does it over a period of years. The late, great Johnny Cash used to sing a song called “*One Piece At A Time*”, about a car worker who bit by bit smuggled enough out of the factory to build his own car – but that doesn’t seem the same as car-stealing, does it?

“But everyone does it,” you reply. “What’s so wrong with it?” Well, at the most basic level, those things don’t belong to you. They have been provided by the company to facilitate their programme, and for everything that is stolen, they have to foot the bill. You may think that’s OK and they can afford it – especially when you see what the members of the board are earning – but it isn’t your place to re-distribute wealth in that way. With many firms, especially smaller ones, it may mean that they cannot afford to tolerate pilfering and still keep wages at appropriate levels: they can’t afford to do that and pursue policies that are just with smaller suppliers: they can’t afford to do that and, if they’re a public service, keep benefits and taxes at the right levels.

3. STEALING TIME AND EFFORT

If you are being paid to do something and you are not doing it as well as you are capable of doing because you are shirking or skiving, then accepting your wages is tantamount to stealing. Taking for nothing that which is the fruit of someone else's work is effectively stealing their time and energy. When I was a union official during my days in education, I used to get very frustrated by those pious people – mainly, alas, Christians – who would never take industrial action about salaries on principle because they thought it was somehow morally wrong. The same people never seemed to have any moral difficulty accepting the salary rises that someone else's hard work – and sometimes sacrifice – had won for them.

Again, all the arguments about pilfering apply here as well, plus the fact that your laziness is shifting the burden on to others. Time and effort are gifts from God, just as much as are land or money or food, so to steal them from someone else is just as wrong in God's eyes. That's the basic argument behind the whole copyright situation: many of the men and women who write the songs we use in worship and copy so frequently earn their living by that means and we need to recognise and honour that. (I would add, for those who might be anxious, that the church pays through an official licensing system for the right to copy, record and project the songs we use.)

4. GREED

Once again, as we have seen over the past couple of weeks when we looked at murder and adultery, this all boils down to a question of attitude. At the root of it this week is greed – wanting more than we need so that others have to go without. Gambling has that as its driving force and the National Lottery unashamedly exploits it. The books at the end of the Old Testament – *Amos*, *Micah*, *Joel* – are full of condemnation of people's greed, and St Paul calls it “*idolatry*” in *Colossians 3:5*. Your Sunday joint was very probably fed on grain that could have fed starving Africans. Your chainstore clothes were made by young children in appalling conditions in South East Asia. Your trendy leather items may well have contributed to the further erosion of some endangered species. We could go on. In a very real sense, it's all just stealing – stealing from God's world, from God's people, from our brothers and sisters here and overseas – stealing to satisfy our greed. And that is not God's way. Which takes us to our final point ...

5. STEALING FROM GOD

As soon as I say those words, you probably echo the words of Malachi's listeners – “*How do we rob God?*” (*Malachi 3:8*). (If some of you have just woken up and wonder why we're talking about Rob Dodd, listen more carefully!) Basically, says the prophet, you're stealing from God because you're holding back from him that which is his – the “*tithe*”. That is the proportion of your income that should be devoted to God before you start to think about any other kind of expenditure. In the Old Testament, it was a tenth of their income – and the first tenth at that. Do you give to God that which is his, either through the offering here or through some other aspect of his work? Do you work out in advance what you are going to give, or does God get whatever you can find in the bottom of your pocket at quarter past eleven on a Sunday morning? Paul doesn't specify a tenth in his letters, but he does say you need to give it careful thought – look at *1 Corinthians 16:2*. And that might well include thinking about Gift Aid, too.

Of course, times are hard – when are they not? – but God does promise that no-one will go short who is faithful in this. In fact, he promises added blessing to the people of Israel. That isn't our motive for giving, but I – and I'm sure I'm not the only one – can testify to the truth of those words. Don't steal from God: there's no point, and you'll probably miss out on a lot of blessing one way or another.

At the root of our stealing, however it's done, is a basic attitude of selfishness and greed, and we need to deal with that, just as we've heard about anger and lust over the past couple of weeks – to ask for God's forgiveness and for the strength of his Holy Spirit in the face of temptation.

(Housegroup notes follow on next page)

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We've probably all had experience of theft, but most of us think of ourselves only as victims. Few of us would probably say that we had stolen anything. But in our fairly complex economic system it is difficult to be completely guiltless about this commandment.

For the Israelites to whom this commandment was first given, theft could have been a matter of life or death. While they were wandering around in the desert, they would have carried only those things which were absolutely essential, so to lose a tool or an animal could have been very serious indeed.

We must take into account the fact that all that we have is from God and we are only stewards of it. Some things will need to be used exclusively by one person or family, but we must be prepared to share and be good managers of God's resources. Although we probably don't actually steal property, there are ways in which we can be implicated in stealing.

1 Tax evasion

The Bible makes it clear that we have a responsibility to pay our taxes. This is so that all society, especially the poor and the weak, can be helped. Look at *Matthew 22:15-22* & *Romans 13:6,7*.

2 Pilfering & fiddling

This is a great temptation for many people. We help ourselves to little odds and ends from the workplace which seem trivial in themselves, but can add up to quite a burden on the employer.

3 Stealing time and effort

Shirking and skiving are effectively stealing from the employer. Not only are you adding to that burden, but you are also causing other people to make up for your laziness. This also applies to such things as copyright.

4 Greed

The underlying attitude is really one of greed, of not being satisfied with what you have already got. Paul refers to it as "idolatry" in *Colossians 3:5*.

5 Stealing from God

The people of Israel are accused of stealing from God in *Malachi 3* because they don't devote to him a proportion of their income. Paul updates it in *1 Corinthians 16:2*.

Questions for discussion

1. If you have ever been the victim of a robbery or burglary, briefly share your experience with the group.
2. If everything is from God, can we really say that we "own" anything?
3. Should we pay taxes even when we don't agree with the use to which the state puts the revenue?
4. Are there any circumstances (e.g. extreme poverty) in which stealing can be justified?
5. In what ways do we "rob God" today? Should we keep to a "tithe"? If we do, should it be before or after tax?