

Foundations: The Eighth Commandment **Deuteronomy 5:19 (AFBC 10/16/16)**

In case you haven't looked, today's commandment is about stealing--taking what's not ours. A while back, I ran across a funny story about people taking things that didn't belong to them, only to later regret doing it. I hope you'll enjoy it as much as I did!

If you've ever been to New York City, you were likely impressed at the masses of people who live there—all of whom have at least one dog! It's estimated that there are about 11 million dogs in the city, along with about 8 million cats. So many pets create a problem for New Yorkers.

Did you see the recent Family Circle cartoon where Billy is looking over the family's back yard and decides his family could never move because of all the pets that are buried there. Above Billy's head, there's a little circle where he's picturing a departed dog, two cats, a hamster, a frog, and a goldfish.

But just think--what if you live in a New York City high rise? When your pet dies, you can't just bury it in the backyard. So what do you do? Well, you call the city's sanitation department. For a \$50.00 fee, they will "handle all the arrangements" for you.

Realizing what a problem this is, one enterprising lady came up with a great idea. She plastered flyers around the city and placed ads in the newspaper saying that she would dispose of dearly departed pets for just \$25.00—half what the city charged.

Her plan was brilliant. She went to the Salvation Army resale store and paid two bucks a piece for old suitcases. Then she would pick up people's expired pets and put them in those suitcases. Next, she would hop the subway, put the suitcase down, and act like she wasn't watching it.

It never failed. Before long, some thief would come by and steal it—with the dead animals still inside. What a plan. She **saved** money for the pet owners, **made** money for herself, and probably **reformed** a few thieves in the process! (cat burglars?)

She eventually got caught, of course. Police kept finding discarded suitcases filled with dead animals. At first, they thought they were dealing with some kind of a cult, but autopsies showed the pets had all died of natural causes.

Finally, they caught her. But her plan worked well for a time since she could always count on somebody stealing her suitcase!

Commandment number eight says, "You shall not steal." But lots of us do! In fact, we keep finding new ways to do it, and new rationales for why it's not really stealing.

For the past few years, the entertainment industry has been cracking down on the practice known as "file-sharing." Sharing is a good thing, right? Well, not if it's stealing. Even our best excuses for why it's not stealing doesn't change the fact that it often is.

Technology has increased our opportunities to break the 8th commandment. Car thieves and cattle rustlers have been around for a long time; but identity thieves—they're on the cutting edge!

For most of us, though, the temptation to steal doesn't involve cars, cattle, or computers. It's usually something more ordinary.

Some of us remember the Norman Rockwell painting that pictures a female shopper and a male butcher facing each other across the counter. There's a set of scales on the counter, and a turkey is being weighed.

The butcher and customer each have a pleasant, though somewhat sly, smile as if they are each part of a private joke. This causes you to study the picture more carefully, and when you do, you see that butcher's thumb is pushing down on the scales from his side, while the customer's finger is pushing up on them from her side.

Are these two thieves? It's doubtful that either of them would ever rob a bank or steal a car. They would be indignant if accused of stealing, yet neither hesitated to try to tip the scales in their favor even though there was little to be gained from it.

The National Association for the Prevention of Shoplifting reports there are approximately 27 million shoplifters—that's one in every 11 people--in our nation today. More than 10 million people have been caught shoplifting in the last five years. They say there's no "typical" shoplifter. Men and women do it about equally, and the majority of them got started very young.

Fortune magazine reports that shoplifting, along with employee theft, amounted to a \$32 Billion loss for businesses last year. Stealing has been going on for a long time, but it's getting worse.

Fudging on income taxes is on the rise, too, as is welfare fraud, embezzlement schemes, stock price manipulations, and cheating in school. We have a bull market in stealing and a bear market in honesty—and we're all paying a price for this.

Have you ever been robbed? 1) Ever had your wallet or purse stolen? 2) How about a bicycle, lawnmower, or other items taken from your garage? 3) Or a house or vehicle break-in?

If it's happened to you, how did it make you feel? Less trusting? Less safe? More suspicious, cynical, or angry?

It leaves a mark when someone takes what's ours. We can say it's only stuff, so it doesn't really matter—but when someone takes what's ours, it does matter. Our possessions are extensions of ourselves—representing, hopefully, the fruit of our labors—so it's kinda' personal.

It's not always a physical item that's taken. Some will stoop so low as to try to steal your reputation, your good name. I dread political campaigns because this is what they've become—character assassinations! We shouldn't stand for it, let alone participate in it.

As followers of Christ, we're in the truth business. Some of us are just busting at the seams right now, though, to say with absolute certainty which candidate has lied the most and why we should enthusiastically support the lesser liar—as if any of us really know.

That's a bit audacious, or, at least, naive—and, as a result, aren't we allowing our own credibility—or our witness--to also be stolen?

Well, back to something more tangible. This commandment, "You shall not steal," implies that God approves of ownership. You can't steal something from someone who doesn't own it.

Actually, how we and others relate to our property is an important topic in the Bible. Thirty-six parables of Jesus are recorded in the New Testament, and seventeen of these are about property and ownership and how God wants us to manage what we have.

I read an interesting interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. It focused on what it says about our possessions. It's amazing how these very familiar stories of Jesus keep surprising us with new insight. The story begins in **Luke 10:30**:

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.”

1. So what was the robbers’ attitude toward possessions? **“What’s yours is mine: I’ll take it.”** That was their attitude... and it’s what we generally think of when we hear the word “stealing.”

But it’s the same attitude as persons who pad their expense accounts, or cheat on taxes, or purchase items on credit with no intention of ever paying for them. Cheating on tests does the same thing. It robs other students.

It’s the attitude that says, “I don’t care that you’ve worked hard for your good grade. What’s yours is mine, and I will take the benefits of your hard work for myself.” Get used to doing this and who knows what it will seem okay to steal next.

It’s a pervasive attitude. A wife complains to her husband, “The housekeeper stole two of our brand new towels.” He replies, “Well, some people are just like that. Which ones did she take?” The wife says, “Those nice ones we took from the Hilton last week.”

What’s yours is mine. I’ll take it. I wonder: is this ever our attitude toward something that belongs to somebody else?

2. Let’s get back to the parable of the Good Samaritan: **“A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So, too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.” (Luke 10:31-32)**

What’s the attitude here: **“What’s mine is mine, and I’ll keep it.”** Nothing wrong with that, of course, unless you’re a follower of Jesus. Jesus-followers, though, are held to a higher standard—His!

We’re mistaken if we think stealing is only a sin of commission (i.e., I commit this sin by taking property that belongs to you). Jesus teaches that stealing can also be a sin of omission.

We can steal by doing nothing—by not doing what we should. The person who can work, but chooses to live off others is a thief. The person who is working but fails to give a full day’s work for a day’s pay steals from his employer and his fellow employees.

A manager says to a job applicant, "I'm sorry I can't hire you, but there isn't enough work to keep you busy." "No problem," the man says, "you'd be surprised at how little it takes."

Most of us resonate with *those* issues. We don't like deadbeats! But are we ever guilty of looking the other way in the face of inequity and injustice and tax codes that take increasing amounts from those who have little while putting more into the hands of those who have in abundance—could we be robbing the poor?

There's an attitude that I hear expressed increasingly in the public arena. It goes like this: "I've got mine, and I'm hanging on to all of it with all my might, because I really don't care about you."

We can call it pragmatism or capitalism or free markets or the American way; we just dare not call it Christian. Jesus condemned the attitude that says "what's mine is mine, and I'll keep it—no matter what your need happens to be."

Hear this word of the Lord from **Ephesians 4:28**—"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, (WHY?) that he may have something to share with those in need." So often we skip the *why*, but it's the *why* that makes this Christian!

3. Which brings us to the third attitude found in Jesus' parable-- and Jesus made it clear that this is the only attitude that He approves of:

"A Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'" (Luke 10:33-35)

So what is the Good Samaritan's attitude? **"What's mine is yours; let's share it."** This is the right attitude toward money and possessions according to Jesus.

We know how we struggle with this, though. We have cute little sayings to ease our guilt—things like "Money isn't everything, but it's way ahead of whatever's in second place;" or "Money can't buy

happiness, but it sure keeps you in touch with your kids.”

Jesus taught that the way we use our wealth today will have consequences tomorrow. Back in the early 1900’s, there was a great industrialist who was very generous with his church. But then came the Great Depression, and he lost his business, his property and investments. He lost everything.

He took the only job he could find, working as a custodian in the very church that he had once helped to build through the large amounts of money he’d given.

Occasionally, someone would point out the irony of this and ask him if he did not wish he had some of the money back. Instead of any bitterness or regret, though, he would simply respond: “What I spent, I had; what I saved, I lost; but what I gave, I have.”

4. The right attitude from a Biblical perspective is really this: **“What I have is God’s, let’s share it.”** We believe God gives us our money, time, and abilities, in order to use them for His Kingdom and glory. Failing to do this, as Christians, is stealing.

The eighth commandment is straightforward: “You shall not steal.” Stealing begins with wrong attitudes about our possessions. These get expressed in the way we relate to our fellow human beings and in how we relate to God and to His church.

Our challenge is to live close enough to God that we can remain honest when we’re tempted to steal, whether the temptation is to take something that does not belong to us, or more often, to withhold something that God says belongs to Him.

A little boy stood for a long time by an apple barrel in a country store. The owner finally said, “Son, are you trying to steal one of those apples?” The boy replied, “No sir, I’m trying to keep from it.” Avoid the temptation to steal!

It does not matter what we own, the number of deeds we hold, the bank accounts and stock funds with our names on them, the Bible teaches that whatever we possess, we hold in trust for God.

Psalm 24:1 says, **“The earth is the LORD’S, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.”**

I guess that means that *any stealing* we do is ultimately stealing from God. Do you see this? All we claim to own is really God’s.

Everything we are and all we have are His. He loans it to us temporarily. When we're gone, someone else will claim it.

We are stewards, caretakers, of all God's gifts. Whether it's a lot or a little, we're to be obedient to God. To do anything less is to steal God's stuff!

That's not me speaking. Listen: **“Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.’ But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ ‘In tithes and offerings.’” (Malachi 3:8-9)**

What's our tithe? It's ten percent of our income. I shouldn't have to do this, but some of you have trouble figuring this out. Think about the amount on your paycheck or pension. Get that figure in mind. If you don't remember it exactly, you can “guesstimate.”

If your check reads \$580.00, move the decimal one spot to the left, and the amount is \$58.00. That's a tithe—ten percent. If it says \$2000, do the same thing, and \$200 is your tithe. It all belongs to God, but He says bring the tithe into His storehouse, His church, and discover the joys of being obedient to God.

We steal from God when we get caught up in greedy consumerism. We break God's commandment when we allow ever-mounting debts to get in the way of our giving. We must learn to say no to things and yes to God. Now hear God's promise when we do:

“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.’” (Malachi 3:10)

God is concerned about how we relate to money and possessions, whether they're ours or someone else's. We must not steal another person's property, but we're just as responsible before God for what we do with our own. Because God's word says so.

Bottom line is this: you shall not steal anybody's stuff. By all means, you shall not steal God's stuff. And, it's all... God's stuff.