



# GIVERS AND TAKERS: "YOU SHALL NOT STEAL"

*SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES*

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In this series we are looking at the relevancy of the Ten Commandments in our lives. As we have been learning, these ancient commandments, written by the finger of God on tablets of stone, are still the underpinnings of society. This morning will consider the eighth word from Mount Sinai, "You shall not steal."

I will never forget as a boy curiously taking a cassette tape from a store, then feeling so bad about it, I returned it unopened a week later.

A professional athlete, recalling his high school years, said, "I took a little English, a little math, some science, a few hubcaps and some wheel covers."

Some of you golfers are tempted to steal golf balls, as I am. But Mark Twain said, "It is good sportsmanship to not pick up lost golf balls while they are still rolling."

Perhaps we can all relate to stories of petty, juvenile thievery, or youthful destruction of property, either done to us or by us. However, if we were to dismiss our subject this morning into the realm of obvious criminal activity, or say that we are merely talking about someone else, we will greatly diminish it.

By definition, stealing is taking something that does not belong to us. Stealing is wrong, no matter how small or how big the thing stolen, or whether we get caught or not. This is a basic tenet of any civil society. Anything less is anarchy. No rational society or person would disagree with this.

Where does this value come from? you ask. From God himself! It is part of the created order of life. As such it is reflected in the Ten Commandments, which, in turn, reflect the character of God. This word, "You shall not steal," comes in the second section, the last six commandments, which instruct us how to love our neighbor as ourselves. The first four commandments deal with loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. When Jesus was asked by a legal expert, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (Matt. 22:36-40), the Lord replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" And then, as if that were not bold enough, Jesus added these words, "Upon these two depend the whole Law and the Prophets." Quite a strong statement from the one who should know! So the commandments are worthy of our attention this morning.

In the sixth and seventh commandments, we have seen that our neighbor has a right to his life and his wife. Today, in the eighth commandment, we will see

that he has a right to his possessions.

Specific case-law in the Old Testament prohibited the secret or open taking of another's property. But it applied much further into everyday life:

It also protected injury done to property. In other words, if you borrow your neighbor's weedeater and it breaks, you fix it.

It protected against fraudulently keeping another person's property, even through carelessness or neglect. So, return those library books.

It prohibited an employer from withholding wages that were due, or not paying a decent, living wage to an employee. So, even though the "law of the land" may allow paying minimum wage, the law of the Lord may instruct our hearts to put love of our neighbor ahead of profit margin. In other words, taking economic advantage of someone who is weak is robbery.

Conversely, an employee who inflates the number of hours on his time card or pretends to be sick would be guilty of stealing.

Forgetting to pay your bills or abusing credit extended to you would fall into the category of stealing as well.

Clearly, God values honesty and respect of property, but not for the property itself. The heart behind this commandment is that stealing defrauds and damages relationships. Thus, if we cease practicing these things, we would be loving our neighbor.

Do we do a better job loving our neighbor in our world today? Hardly. We know there is massive tax-cheating, insurance and workman's compensation fraud going on. The rule of the day seems to be to take what you can get. The root of stealing remains the same throughout all generations: it is greed and covetousness.

The human condition is to see life from the perspective of a taker, so we defraud our neighbor by taking, manipulating or exaggerating to get what we want. Oftentimes the "end" of advancing our career and protecting our assets, justifies any "means" of doing it.

We usually trust in our own ingenuity and maneuvering skills more than trusting in God. When self-preservation and self-advancement are our goals, a subtle shift takes place in our "bottom line," away from relying on God. If trusting God is going to be too slow or inefficient, then we feel we must take things into our own hands. (The prophet Hosea (ch. 4) links theft with the lack of knowledge of God, love, and faithfulness.)

God's design is that we love people and use things, but we end up loving things and using people.

My three-year-old son is a "taker" by nature. (I wonder where did he get this?) It saddens my wife and me as parents that when we have his friends over, he is very selective with what he wants them to play with. Even a toy he is not interested in suddenly becomes a hot item when another child picks it up. But how different is he than we big kids with our big toys? We've simply exchanged Tonka trucks for being first in line for the next promotion at work.

A taker doesn't understand that everything we have is a *gift*, not a *right*. Our next breath is a gift from God, but we've come to expect it as a right. Someone has said, "When your expectations for what life should give you are high, you experience great disappointment. When they are low, there is more chance for contentment. And when you have no expectations, then everything is a gift!" Perhaps there is some wisdom in that. Indeed, Paul says, "you are not your own...you've been bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Takers also have a common disease: they think the world "owes them one." The government, a retail outlet, or another person has burned them, so when the opportunity comes to even the score, they feel justified in doing so. Many years ago, I spent time at Vacaville State Correctional Facility—not as an inmate, but as a visitor with a prison ministry. It was interesting to note that the inmates vowed that when they got out, they would "do it smarter." The problem wasn't the act itself, but the fact that they had been caught. But, isn't that our attitude too? We, too, continue to steal from our neighbor, even though it may not violate society's laws.

John the Baptist shook up the culturally accepted practices of stealing in his day when people from all walks of life came to hear him and be baptized. As they approached, he would say to them, "You brood of vipers!" Not exactly a warm welcome. John was not out to make friends and impress people. In Luke 3:7-14, he said to these crowds, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." In other words, the quality of your life should match your lip-service—and don't count on your good bloodlines or educational credentials or resume for winning points with God.

Let us see what else John said to the crowds. Verse 10: "What should we do then?" [they] asked. John answered, "The man who has two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher, they asked, 'what should we do?' 'Don't collect any more than you are required to,' he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, 'And what should we do?' He replied, 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.'" John is saying, "Stop and think about the cultural standards and God's standards, based on your new identity. Stop

stealing. Be generous. Be a giver, not a taker."

So, heeding the eighth commandment involves more than simply stopping our stealing ways. There is always a positive moral component to the commandments. We should expect that there is something deeper and more profound in the mind and heart of God—the true intent of this command. Indeed, he is writing it on our hearts through his Spirit as we come to know him.

The positive moral component here is: be an extravagant giver! Start being generous. Stealing is immoral because it is antithetical to the character of God. God is a giver, the opposite of a taker. God loves to give. He gives out of his storehouse of riches and resources as a loving father would to his own children. The basis for human generosity is the generosity of God.

We see this everywhere in scripture. For example:

James 1:5: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

And from Psalm 127:

Unless the LORD builds the house,  
its builders labor in vain;  
Unless the LORD watches over the city,  
the watchmen stand guard in vain.  
It is vain for you to rise up early  
and stay up late,  
toiling for food to eat—  
for He gives to His beloved...sleep."

We can become preoccupied with building up and protecting what we have, but unless we know that God is a Giver who is behind all of the gifts that we have, and unless we learn to trust him, then all our thinking and planning is in vain.

And perhaps the most familiar line in the Bible:

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, He gave..."

The hymn title says it all: "God, whose giving knows no ending." This is who God is.

Jesus was never a taker. The words of Paul, in 2 Cor. 8:9, in fact, reveal our Lord's attitude: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reveals the law of love, rather than the law of reciprocal justice, i.e. "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." While he does not address a word that directly corresponds to the eighth commandment, he has much to say about being generous, extravagant givers. Listen to his words, from Matt. 5:39-42: "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." Jesus intended this to be shocking generosity!

And finally, knowing God as a Giver frees us to re-

flect that same attitude. Paul echoes the eighth commandment in Ephesians, making it even more practical: "Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have (something) to share with him who has need" (4:28). Not only stop stealing, but work honestly so you may have the outward looking perspective of meeting needs.

Further, Paul reminds the Corinthian church that they may be liberal because they may trust that God will supply:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written:

"He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God (2 Cor. 9:6-11).

We can be generous because God has modeled for us how to be givers; and because he will supply both the desire and the means to be generous as we trust him.

How about us? Are we generous even to the point of perhaps crossing the line of what is expected? Let us be wise and creative in our generosity. And our giving need not always take the form of writing a check. In fact, I think that is the least creative form of generosity. Share your home; don't make it a museum. Donate your time. Unexpectedly come home from work early to spend time listening to and loving your children. But, certainly, start somewhere.

In our Junior High ministry we have a relationship with an inner-city family of nine, seven of whom are children. We are way over our heads when we stop and think about their complex needs, but we're learning to ask God for what we can and cannot do. Our kids help do the grocery shopping. With our limited funds, we realize the family will need butter, milk and eggs before a tub of licorice. And getting to know this family starkly reminds us of how self-centered we have become in our own comfort zones.

We are to hold things loosely in this life and give generously.

I.A.R. Wylie said: "True generosity requires more of us than kindly impulse. Above all it requires imagination—the capacity to see people in all their perplexities and needs, and to know how to expend ourselves effectively for them."

Martin Luther said: "I have held many things in my

hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess."

So, it is not enough to stop being a taker; we must have a disposition to give. We must dispense with the world view that what we have defines us and is ours. In fact, everything is God's, and we are his stewards of it. It would be a powerful and irresistible thing if we were to move into our communities with the generosity of Christ. It strikes me that Jesus called a "taker," a thief, into his kingdom as he died on the cross.

As we come to understand the nature of God as a giver, and reflect that nature, perhaps it might touch a soul around us.

To illustrate this, I have asked Dr. Arthur Halliday to read a scene adapted from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. It is entitled, "The Good Bishop." As you listen, consider the character who has the attitude of a taker, and the one with extravagant generosity.

Jean Valjean was a wood-chopper's son, who, while very young, was left an orphan. His older sister brought him up, but when he was seventeen years of age, his sister's husband died, and upon Jean came the labor of supporting her seven little children. Although a man of great strength, he found it very difficult to provide food for them at the poor trade he followed.

One winter day he was without work, and the children were crying for bread. They were nearly starved. And, when he could withstand their entreaties no longer, he went out in the night, and, breaking a baker's window with his fist, carried home a loaf of bread for the famished children. The next morning he was arrested for stealing, his bleeding hand convicting him.

For this crime he was sent to the galleys with an iron collar riveted around his neck, with a chain attached, which bound him to his galley seat. Here he remained four years, then he tried to escape, but was caught, and three years were added to his sentence. Then he made a second attempt, and also failed, the result of which was that he remained nineteen years as a galley slave for stealing a single loaf of bread.

When Jean left the prison, his heart was hardened. He felt like a wolf. His wrongs had embittered him, and he was more like an animal than a man. He came with every man's hand raised against him to the town where the good bishop lived.

At the inn they would not receive him because they knew him to be an ex-convict and a dangerous man. Wherever he went, the knowledge of him went before, and everyone drove him away. They would not even allow him to sleep in a dog kennel or give him the food they had saved for the dog. Everywhere he went they cried: "Be off! Go away, or you will get a charge of shot." Finally, he wandered to the house of the good bishop, and a good man he was.

For his duties as a bishop, he received from the state 3,000 francs a year; but he gave away to the poor 2,000 francs of it. He was a simple, loving man, with a great heart, who thought nothing of himself, but loved everybody. And everybody loved him.

Jean, when he entered the bishop's house, was a most forbidding and dangerous character. He shouted in a harsh, loud voice: "Look here, I am a galley slave. Here is my yellow passport. It says: 'Five years for robbery and fourteen years for trying to escape. The man is very dangerous.' Now that you know who I am, will you give me a little food, and let me sleep in the stable?"

The good bishop said: "Sit down and warm yourself. You will take supper with me, and after that sleep here."

Jean could hardly believe his senses. He was dumb with joy. He told the bishop that he had money, and would pay for his supper and lodging.

But the priest said: "You are welcome. This is not my house, but the house of Christ. Your name was known to me before you showed me your passport. You are my brother."

After supper the bishop took one of the silver candlesticks that he had received as a Christmas present, and, giving Jean the other, led him to his room, where a good bed was provided. In the middle of the night Jean awoke with a hardened heart. He felt that the time had come to get revenge for all his wrongs. He remembered the silver knives and forks that had been used for supper, and made up his mind to steal them, and go away in the night. So he took what he could find, sprang into the garden, and disappeared.

When the bishop awoke, and saw his silver gone, he said: "I have been thinking for a long time that I ought not to keep the silver. I should have given it to the poor, and certainly this man was poor."

At breakfast time five soldiers brought Jean back to the bishop's house. When they entered, the bishop, looking at him, said: "Oh, you are back again! I am glad to see you. I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver also, and will bring forty francs. Why did you not take

them?"

Jean was stunned indeed by these words. So were the soldiers. "This man told us the truth, did he?" they cried. "We thought he had stolen the silver and was running away. So we quickly arrested him."

But the good bishop only said: "It was a mistake to have him brought back. Let him go. The silver is his. I gave it to him."

So the officers went away.

"Is it true," Jean whispered to the bishop, "that I am free? I may go?"

"Yes," he replied, "but before you go take your candlesticks."

Jean trembled in every limb, and took the candlesticks like one in a dream. "Now," said the bishop, "depart in peace, but do not go through the garden, for the front door is always open to you day and night."

Jean looked as though he would faint.

Then the bishop took his hand, and said: "Never forget you have promised me you would use the money to become an honest man."

He did not remember having promised anything, but stood silent while the bishop continued solemnly:

"Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. I have bought your soul for you. I withdrew it from black thoughts and the spirit of hate, and gave it to God."

May we go from this place with hearts moved by the great Giver to cease taking and holding God's silver and rather, like the bishop, love our neighbor through uncommon and extravagant generosity.

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