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The 10 Commandments – “You Shall Not Steal

Ephesians 4:28 – Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

Exodus 20:15 - You shall not steal.

Over the summer we have been wrestling with what we use as our moral compass, as we make the little and big decisions of our daily lives. We've been working our way through the 10 Commandments, the ethical standards upheld in our Old Testament, taking a look at what they meant for the people in the early Israelite communities, and seeing what wisdom and guidance they still hold for us today in our contemporary world.

This morning we turn to the 7th commandment, which reads simply, “You shall not steal.” Most people understand this mandate in the obvious sense of blatant stealing... which makes us think this one doesn't really apply to those who are able to steer clear of the crimes of shoplifting, burglary, and grand theft auto. But before we cast this commandment aside as irrelevant to those innocent of such offenses, let's look a little more carefully at some of its other implications.

In the Hebrew culture, full of rural, nomadic clans, the concept of stealing was very different than our current understanding. For Israel, all property was held in common, and for the sake of the welfare of the total community. The original function of this commandment was to protect the common property of the clan, the well – so all could have access to water, the grazing land, the sheep, and the crops – kept from being commandeered by any individual for the sake of personal security and profit. They understood that God owned the land and they were, at best, only it's keepers. Therefore to deprive any member of that community of their needs, their share of life, was to sin against God.

This concept is still alive and thriving in Native American culture and some European towns where public grazing rights are still part of the “town commons”. In Cambridge University in England, the “backs” of the University, the open land behind the strip of colleges along the river Cam, are still used for public grazing lands. Only when the Israelites began to

settle in urban areas, in Canaanite towns, did the idea of private property and personal security begin to emerge. With this rise of individualism, rather than the common good, came the need to protect the poor from exploitation... and so, Israel wrote laws.

The Old Testament is FULL of warnings, for example, using false weights when you're buying grain, or charging interest on debts, or even holding the cloak of the debtor as collateral overnight, when that cloak is the only thing the poor had to protect themselves from exposure. The laws of charity, the requirement of almsgiving, the distribution of goods to those in need is a great concern in the Judeo-Christian teaching. The Jewish community believed that a minimum of 1/10th of one's income, or a tithe, belonged to God, to care for those who cannot care for themselves. Built into the fabric of this agrarian, farming community, was the right of the poor to glean, to pick up leftovers from the harvested fields, and the responsibility of the rich to LEAVE LEFTOVERS IN THAT FIELD. Stealing in the Biblical sense, is not so much a private sin as it is a social sin.

With the rise of the middle class and the industrialization of the western world, we swung away from the Scriptural obligation to provide for the poor. The concept of rugged individualism emerged and still plagues us today. The idea that everyone has the same opportunities and capability of "pulling themselves up from their bootstraps", rather than offering support and aid where it is needed most. Success of the individual over the community is raised up as a value in our culture... and it impacts every level of society... from hyper competition to be the best in school, to the cut-throat corporate market that disregards the needs of the consumer in preference to profits, to our politicians pushing through laws that protect the highest bidder.

With individual success raised as the highest value, stealing in this culture has become high art... corporations do it with pension funds. Politicians do it by siphoning off money from one project to another. Packagers do it by inflating the size of the product box and reducing the weight of the product. Students do it with camera phones and computers. Stealing has become big business... to the point that we now take it for granted... we've come to expect that, of course they will do it... and more often than not, they'll get away with it too!

In a report published by Oxfam in January, we learned that four out of every five dollars of wealth generated in 2017 ended up in the pockets of the richest one percent, while the poorest half of humanity got nothing. It found that 3.7 billion people who make up the poorest half of the world saw absolutely no increase in their wealth in 2017, while 82 percent of the wealth generated last year went to the richest one percent of the global population. We live in a global economy that rewards the super-rich and neglects the poor... if that isn't stealing, by the heart of the commandment, then I don't know what is!

In our day, people INSIST that social services spending and minimum wage needs to be kept at bare minimum – keeping struggling people WELL below the poverty line – all the while insisting that tax breaks are needed to secure the profit margins of the wealthiest companies in the world.

You shall not steal has been reduced to "No shoplifting, no pilfering, no pickpocketing, no petty theft", and all the while, the poor are getting poorer, their children getting less educated, their infants getting less strong. And getting rich has become the great sport of

cheating the consumer, increasing corporate profits... rather than enriching the entire community in security, in decency, in dignity, and enabling the universal search for the fullness of life.

This commandment is crying out for us to rethink the Western notion that the accumulation of wealth and personal security, at the expense of others, is really an ideal worth striving for. Rather than living into the scramble for more and better and best for me and mine, maybe it's time to shift to a "pay it forward", community based perspective – to treat others the way we would want to be treated... to care for the good of the community, the good of all, rather than just the self. This is really the heart of the moral code dictated by so many of our scriptures... do unto others... care for the widow and orphan, welcome the stranger... and love your neighbor as yourself. I pray that our moral compass points a bit closer to the heart than to the wallet, that we hear this commandment, "You shall not steal" and think about the big picture as we shop, as we vote, as we go about our daily lives at home and at work... and if we allow this commandment to guide us, our families, our communities, our nation, and our world will be better for it! May it be so. Amen.