

God's Answer to Your Greatest Struggles
Our Struggle for Integrity

"You shall not steal."
Exodus 20:15

In our series, "God's Answer to our Greatest Struggles," we come to the eighth commandment of the perfect ten: "*you shall not steal.*" By the way, here's an easy way to remember what we've seen so far:

*Above all else love God alone,
Bow down to neither wood nor stone.
God's name refuse to take in vain,
The Sabbath rest with care maintain.*

*Respect your parents all your days;
Hold sacred human life always.
Be loyal to your chosen mate;
Steal nothing, neither small nor great.ⁱ*

The author of those words is Elton Trueblood. Following World War II he wrote a book entitled, *Foundations for Reconstruction*. His thesis in the book is that the recovery and restoration of world order following the war would depend upon a rock solid moral foundation as summarized in the Ten Commandments. Of course, our nation has largely moved in the opposite direction, banning the Big Ten from schoolroom and courthouse.

"Be loyal to your chosen mate." That's our struggle for purity. "Steal nothing, neither small nor great." That's our struggle for integrity.

What comes to your mind when you think of this eighth commandment? (Go ahead, say it out loud). Maybe you think of a masked man climbing out of an upper-story window with a bulging sack over his shoulders, stealing away into the night. Or maybe your thoughts go to the recent news of chain robberies here in Portland over recent weeks.

If we superficially stereotype this commandment, we might draw the very presumptuous, prideful conclusion that we finally have here a commandment that we have kept. The fact is, however, nothing could be further from the truth. You may not be wanted for bank robbery or corporate fraud, but there are many subtle ways in which you and I struggle for integrity in our lives.

To help us see this, we'll start with a simple definition of what it means to steal. In his recent book on the Ten Commandments, Colin Smith offers one of the best definitions I've read. It focuses not only on the action of stealing, but on the attitude behind it:

Stealing = The desire to *get* as much as possible while *giving* as little as possible.ⁱⁱ

The spirit behind this commandment is not simply taking without permission or right (as the dictionary defines it). It is more than that. *It is being a taker rather than a giver.* With that understanding, we begin to see the many subtle ways that this commandment applies to you and me in our families, in the workplace, and in even in our church.

Stealing from Employers

Take for example the area of stealing from our employers. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, employee dishonesty costs American businesses over \$50 billion annually. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce estimates that 75 percent of all employees steal at least once, and over half of these steal again and again. The chamber also reports that one of every three business failures are the direct result of employee theft.ⁱⁱⁱ

Take a look at this... (humorous video, employee awkwardly stealing pens at his office)

Maybe you aren't an obsessive pen thief at your job. And maybe you don't steal cold drinks from the business refrigerator. But do you steal time? Do you take extra, unwarranted breaks? Do you use work time to take care of personal concerns? Do you use the business office machines for personal projects? Do you cut corners, decreasing the quality of your work?

The bottom line is this: Do you attempt to *get* as much as possible from your employer while *giving* as little as possible? That is stealing.

As I was preparing this message, a disturbing thought came to my mind. I remembered that in one of my office files, where I keep my reimbursement sheets, there was an IOU that I had written to the church. I had filed it away over a year ago, thinking that at the moment I was too busy to take care of it. It says, "\$10 for copies." Whenever I fill out a reimbursement form, this paper is there to haunt me. And each time I see it, I say, "Oh yea, I'll get to that!" Well, just to let you know...I've come clean.

But what about you? Is there an area of your work – your relationship with your employer – where you need to "come clean?"

Stealing from Employees

But not only do employees steal from employers, but it also works the other way around. You as an employer can steal from your employees. The most common way this happens is the failure to pay adequate wages for the services rendered.

James addresses this problem when he rebukes those who are employers:

Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.
James 5:4-5 NIV

James only echoes the words of Jeremiah and many of the other OT prophets. Listen to what Jeremiah says:

Woe to him who ... uses his neighbor's services without pay and does not give him his wages. Jeremiah 22:13 NASU

What both James and Jeremiah are saying is this: Quit trying to *get* as much as you can from your employees all the while *giving* them as little as you can. We live in a world that constantly tells us: Get as much as you can for as little as you can. And in very subtle ways, we can consciously or unconsciously begin to apply that to our dealings with those we hire. Rather than asking the question, "What's the least amount I can get away with paying my employees for their hard work?" I should rather ask, "What is the full value of the work rendered by my employees and how can I generously add to that?"

Stealing from Owners

We've seen how this eighth commandment applies to both employers and employees. But what about ways in which we steal anything that is owned by someone else?

In Romans 13:7 Paul says this:

Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. Romans 13:7

When we fail to give others what we owe them, we are stealing (plain and simple). And there are many ways in which you and I can do this.

Of course, one of the most common ways that we steal from others, here specifically the government is by cheating on our taxes. Some of us really believe that the Internal Revenue Service is the Infernal Revenue Service. According to *Money* magazine, more than 40% of Americans approve of cheating on their income taxes.^{iv} You may have heard of the man who wrote to the IRS and said, "A few years ago I cheated on my income taxes. My conscience has been troubling me, and I haven't been able to sleep. So I enclose a check for fifty dollars." But he added a postscript: "If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest." By the way, just to let you know – I don't get any refund on my income tax for preaching this part of the message.

There's reason to believe that the Christians in Paul's day were struggling with this question. The historian Tacitus tells us that there was considerable resistance at this time to paying indirect taxes, resulting in a tax revolt in A.D. 58, right about the time that Paul wrote this letter to the Roman believers.^v This may have encouraged some of these believers to question whether or not they should pay taxes to such a corrupt government. But for Paul, that question is "out of the question." Regardless of your particular view of the government, you have the responsibility to submit in this area to God's established lines of authority. In paying taxes, you are submitting to God's "ministerial staff." When we say "yes" to the laws of the land, we are saying "yes" to Jesus Christ. We receive benefits from the government, we should submit to the government. And this applies not only to paying taxes, but even to such things as speed limits, fishing licenses, stop signs and building codes.

“Give everyone what you owe him: if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.” Another more subtle way that we tend to be takers rather than givers is in the piracy of software and music downloads. A recent Barna Research Group survey shows that:

- 77% of teens who claim to be Christians engaged in at least one type of music piracy in the last six months;
- 81% of other teens engaged in the same activity;
- Only 10% of Christian teens believe copying CDs and unauthorized music downloading is morally wrong;

And how many of that 10% who believe it is morally wrong do it anyway? Over half –60 percent!^{vi}

I have often faced this question with my own children. “But Dad,” they have said, “I already bought the CD! Why can’t I just make a copy for my friend?” Because when you do that, they get the benefit of the music without paying for it. That is stealing!

Another way that we steal, and all too easily excuse our behavior, is taking ideas or written material that belongs to someone else. This is called plagiarism. So I myself don’t plagiarize, here’s the definition given by Dictionary.com:

The unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one’s own original work.^{vii}

Notice, plagiarism is *more than* taking copyrighted material. It includes taking the language and thoughts of anyone and presenting them as your own. This happens all the time. A recent Duke University study found that internet plagiarism has quadrupled in the past six years.^{viii} And it’s not only students who are guilty of this. Unfortunately, some of those who are the most guilty are preachers and teachers!

I once heard it said (no less by a preacher!) that originality is the art of concealing your sources. But that’s not originality, that’s stealing. (By the way, that’s one reason why I am careful to footnote in my messages any statistic, idea or source that is not original to me. You can always find the details of those sources in the written messages on our web site.)

Remember, the principle is this: Be a giver, not a taker. Watch this:

(Drama: To Catch a Thief)

He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Ephesians 4:27

Paul tells us two things in this verse. First, we are to put off thievery. And that means any kind of stealing, as well as the spirit that lies behind it of getting as much as I can while giving as little as I can.

Secondly, we are to put on industry. As for legitimate work that serves others, do it...and do it passionately! Literally, he says, “Do ‘the good’ with his own hands.” Legitimate work is ‘the good’ in and of itself, for it is used of God to serve others.

But then beyond this, what you earn from your work can and should also be used to serve others. “*That he may have something to share with those in need.*” Let me ask you: Is that your motivation in working? Do you see your job as a service to others? Do you make definite plans as to how to use what you earn to help those in need?

Stealing from God

And that leads us to the final way that you and I can steal. We can steal from God. There are many ways we can do this, but let me mention just two – our treasure and our talents.

First, we can steal from God as it relates to our treasure. In fact, the prophet Malachi accuses the believers of his day of “robbing” God by neglecting to give. I know for myself, my greatest motivation in giving is recognizing that *all* that I have already belongs to God. I am simply a steward of His property.

If we really believed that all we have is really God’s property, we would be more careful in how we manage it. The problem, however, is that we really don’t think that way. If you made \$600 last week and I ask you, “How much of that belongs to God?” and you reply, “Why, of course, \$60!” ... then you’ve just totally missed the point. No, it *all* belongs to God. You have your name of your checkbook, but – if you’re a Christ follower – that checkbook belongs not to you but to God. I have my name on my credit card, but – if I’m a Christ follower – that credit card belongs not to me but to God. Apart from this perspective, we steal from God. We experience His good gifts, without recognizing who is the true owner.

But secondly, we can steal from God in the area of our talents. Here I am speaking of the way God has gifted each of us. When you fail to use the gifts God has given you to serve others, you are essentially stealing from God. And the one who fails to use what God has given also steals from other people, those who could benefit from your service.

Let me ask you: are you a giver or a taker? Are you out to get the most you can while giving the least you can? That is stealing. God wants to change us from being *getters* to being *givers*. After all, isn’t that what God has done for us. “For God so loved the world, that he *gave* his only son...”

Where does God need to change your heart as it related to the eighth commandment? Where have you been taking more than giving? Will you invite God to change you today?

ⁱ Elton Trueblood, *Foundations for Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 10 as cited by Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 729.

ⁱⁱ Colin S. Smith, *The 10 Greatest Struggles of Your Life* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2006), 108.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bob Mather, “Employee theft: Prevention Beats Apprehension”; submitted by Aaron Goerner, Utica, New York to www.preachingtoday.com.

^{iv} Darryl Haralson and Sam Ward, *USA Today* Snapshot (4-9-01); source: International Communications Research, *Money* magazine.

^v John Piper from message, "The Limits of Submission to Man" July 5, 1981 Bethlehem Baptist Church; www.soundofgrace.com/piper81/070581m.htm

^{vi} Natalie Nichols Gillespie, "Christian Teens also Download Music Illegally," *Christian Retailing* (6-1-04); submitted by Kevin Miller, Carol Stream, Illinois to www.preachingtoday.com.

^{vii} "plagiarism" (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Retrieved March 14, 2007, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/plagiarism>

^{viii} "Culture Clips," *Plugged In* (June 2006), p. 2 submitted to www.preachingtoday.com.