

**“You Shall Not Steal”
For Our Good Always
Downtown
October 31, 2021**

Morning! How are we doing? I’m Jake this morning we’re in **Deuteronomy 5:19**

As you’re turning there in your Bibles, I wanna ask you something - generally speaking, do you think people are good at heart? Maybe you’ve never thought about that before, and maybe a select few people come to mind who are really evil, but generally speaking....are we as human beings good?

If you were to ask the 18th c philosopher **John Locke**, not to be confused with the character from *Lost* - he would answer yes. We are naturally good. That all of us are born with a blank slate, with a predisposition towards good, and the problem is our environment or our lack of education. Locke would call this theory *tabula rasa*. And I would argue, some 300 years later, as Americans we live in the aftermath of this sort of thinking. At a popular level, I would argue most believe in this theory. That we are by nature good people.

And yet, think about this: what’s that thing you use to drive home from the Gathering today and to get in your house? Not a trick question. Keys. **But why do you own keys?** To keep other people from stealing your car, or breaking into your house. Or most of us, when you open your phone, just about everyone has a password on there. But why? If people are naturally good, then why do we feel the need have passwords on our phone or on our email or our social media?

I’m not gonna do this - but I heard this week about one pastor who for a **sermon illustration** on today’s commandment handed his wallet to a stranger in the congregation and asked them to hold onto it for the duration of the sermon. Now I’m not gonna do that. I think y’all are great. But I know in the back of my mind my eyes would keep going back to that person in the room - even if they were great, which I think all of you are.

And I would argue, the reason why we have keys and passwords and security systems, is because deep down **we don’t believe people are good** so we need to be suspicious and protect our stuff. Just surveying human behavior makes you realize that we love to take things from each other. Nations and governments love to take things from other nations or governments, it’s why we have the national defense system we do. We have to do so many things to prevent people from taking our stuff because we know they’d love to take it if they could.

But even then, sometimes it hits close to home and you get an email from your bank like I did that said, “Hey did you spend \$90 at a gas station in Random Town, Mississippi.” And it’s like, “Nope sure didn’t - and also I wanna see that receipt, how’d you spend that much? How many Red Bulls and Subway sandwiches did you buy?”

That’s what today’s commandment is getting at. Commandment number 8:

Deuteronomy 5:19
““And you shall not steal.

God rightfully assumes that humans, in their current state, can and do take from one another. Taking something that doesn’t belong to you is sin, and our sinful state makes us takers.

I'm not sure it's possible to plumb the depths of story of humanity's fall from **Genesis 3**, but if you are familiar with that story, among other things, the first act of human sin was an act of theft. They took and ate from a tree that God told them was not theirs to take from. They were the original thieves.

But if you look back just a couple chapters before it's pretty wild that they would do that. Take a look at this place God created for them:

Genesis 1:29-30

29 And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.

Seven repetitions of the word "every" or "everything" are found here. Every plant, every tree, every beast. If this doesn't paint the picture of abundance, I don't know what does. God seems to be saying that **He's a generous God** who has put more than what they will need here to enjoy, and that there is plenty to go around. This is kind of like being invited to a **friend's house for a party** who you know habitually over-prepares, and you know there will be no skimping on portion sizes. There is an **abundance** to go around. Enough to steward for yourself and also to share.

We were created **to be enjoyers of what we have been given**. To be givers even, willing to share the abundance of creation with others.

But all of the "everys" weren't enough for the first humans. Their hearts were set on the one tree God said was reserved for Him alone. The one thing that wasn't theirs among innumerable things that were. So **they stole from God**.

God created them to be givers, but sin made them takers. They shifted their **abundant mindset into a scarcity mindset**. They thought "Maybe God is not generous. God is not an abundant giver. God is withholding" and so in a very literal sense, they took matters into their own hands.

And from the jump, by that act, the Scriptures are telling something pretty **revealing about human nature: that deep within us** we have this proclivity towards taking. To reject God's vision of abundance and generosity for a scarcity mindset. To take matters into our own hands, like anxious little creatures. To turn ourselves into our own little god and in the process take what we can so we can come out on top

In other words, there's an inversion that happens. If the call to generosity says "I lose, you gain," stealing says the opposite. **Stealing says "I gain, you lose."** The party that God is inviting us into with all our stuff, turns into a battleground. It becomes a matter of survival of the fittest, I take what I can get so that I make sure I'm provided for.

- This is why all of us own keys and have multiple passwords to our emails and social media accounts: to protect your stuff and your identity from getting stolen.
- This is why in the US alone, the home security industry I heard last year made \$32 billion. That's billion. With a B...followed by illion.

- I heard recently about an episode of SharkTank in 2013, the guy who pitched the first-ever camera on a doorbell was laughed at and didn't end up getting a deal on there because everyone thought "There's no way people would want to put a camera on their doorbell." And now that's become real commonplace.
- This is why if in the middle of the night you wake up to the sound of a window breaking and someone walking around your home you would not think, "Oh nice, I've got a visitor. Well, I hope they make themselves comfortable." You would think, "There's someone in my house, honey give me my bat and call the police."

Like last week, in the Hebrew this commandment is only two words: no stealing. But the ethical vision behind this command is robust. It is in many ways a reversal of the mindset that shifted in the Garden of Eden. God calls the nation of Israel to give up acting like they are in the Lord of the Flies, and instead act as if they live in a world of abundance that He created for them to steward, and ultimately trust Him as their provider.

So in the civil laws of ancient Israel, this vision was fleshed out even further in **Leviticus 19:9-10**.

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. 10 And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.

Not stealing was one thing, but God also called them to approach their resources and possessions in a way **that was generous** to those who did not have enough resources. Farmers weren't allowed to maximize their profit and squeeze every last dime out of their crop, but were instructed to leave the edges of the field, or the gleanings of wheat that were dropped on the ground, or the fallen grapes of the vineyard for the poor. Disobeying God's command to do this was actually stealing from the poor.

He called them to trade their mindset of "I gain, you lose" for a heart that says "**I will lose so you can gain.**" Because God is a provider and there is more than enough to share.

And that is a shift we are in desperate need of, because there are many areas where we see the heart of stealing, or "I gain, you lose," play out in our society. I don't imagine many of you are physically breaking into places and taking things that don't belong to you, but I don't want us to write off this commandment even if that's the case. We may find that we simply break it in more creative ways.

Here's a couple easy ones:

Something I read this week said 48% of Americans polled said its okay to lie to the IRS when it comes to your annual tax returns. Like, "who cares? The government will manage if I tweak the numbers just a bit so big deal." Or when you claim for unemployment even though you actually could work because you might actually make more money by filing for unemployment. When you do that you're saying **I gain, the government loses.**

Or how about this: I'm gonna age myself about, anyone remember **Napster**? That was like the first music pirating site ever. Now I don't "think" that site is around anymore but there are now hundreds of different options to listen to music and watch movies and shows and games illegally now. And I bet for many of us we think "yea but who cares? No one getting hurt. These companies and artists are already super-rich anyway." And I know I'm probably gonna look like the stuck up Christian for saying this, but to be faithful to what the Bible is telling us here - pirating movies and music is a form of breaking the

commandment and if you're ok with that then you are slowly searing your God-given conscience, and in the process searing your ability to more deeply love God and others. When you do that you're saying **"I gain, the industry loses."**

That's just a couple modern forms of it. But think about it in the workplace.

Your call is to be a hard and honest worker no matter your job because you're called to reflect God's abundant generous character. Colossians 3 says when you work, work as if you are working for the Lord.

But think about the employee who shows up to work a little late or leaves a little early but logs in the hours as though they were on time - "but it's totally fine and everyone does it and it's only a few minutes here and there." Again, that's the "I gain, you lose" paradigm playing out. **"I gain, my boss loses."**

So think about the employee who is apathetic at their work. Doing the bare minimum required at their job, but still getting a paycheck. Now that may not look like "stealing" as we may normally view it, but that is stealing time from your boss or your company.

On the flip side if you're a **business owner**.

Your call is to pay your workers fairly and not take advantage of them. You should really wrestle with the question - am I paying my employees fairly according to their work or not? And I know, I know, the reality is as a business owner you want to make a profit - that's kinda the whole point of owning a business in the first place. And I would say if you're able to love Jesus, and pay your employees fairly and do your business ethically - then go out and make as much money as you can so you can go abundantly bless others because God has so abundantly blessed you. I would argue the business sector needs more folks like that.

But if your business practices cause you to pay people unfairly or do business unethically then that's stealing. **You're saying in your heart I gain, my employees lose. Or I gain, my customers lose.**

This is why in Proverbs you get what feels like a random verse like this one:

Proverbs 20:23

Unequal weights are an abomination to the Lord, and false scales are not good.

That's one of those verses I sort of glazed over for the longest time and thought, "Uhh. Ok cool, I didn't have any false scales around my house so I'm good. Next verse." But this was often a reference to how people were paid for their work. There was a balance scale and your boss would measure out on the scale exactly how much you earned. And if the scale determines how much someone got paid--then it was pretty easy to rip someone off so long as you tweaked the scales.

And here God is saying **"It is an abomination."** That's an old-school word we don't use anymore. Literally, it means an object of my hatred. The God of the Bible, who is full of love and grace towards people, cannot stand when people are ripped off and taken advantage of.

And I realize that **can be politicized** quickly, I'm not interested in that, I just want you to inspect your heart. Like what's your motivation when you make a business decision? What's going on in you internally as you pay others for their work?

I'm not saying every job should be paid the same, of course not. And I don't know the exact way to ascertain what the minimum wage should be. But I do think it's wise to realize that the reason laws like the minimum wage are put in place in the first place is because the general knowledge that if it didn't employers might treat their employees unfairly and not pay them according to the work they put in.

This is not a shot against capitalism, because personally I don't know that there is a better economic system in terms of opportunity, but capitalism is a system that needs this commandment as a protection. In the pursuit of success we are not to run over people or take advantage of them.

And if you're actually unable to turn a profit without breaking the eighth commandment, then go out of business or get out of that line of work for the glory of God and find another line of work. Better to lose your business and keep your soul intact than for your business to thrive and your soul dies.

We can steal through greed. And we can also steal through laziness. Through the activity of our hands taking what isn't ours, or through the inactivity of our hands. There are dangers on both sides too of both employer and employee.

As if that doesn't already get in our business sufficiently, Scripture has a category for when we play the "I gain you lose" stealing game with God. Check this out:

Malachi 3:8

"Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me." But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' "In your tithes and contributions."

God's call to His people in the Old Testament was to give 10% known as the tithe. That was bare minimum. And on top of that they were to give their contributions which some scholars say, combined with the tithe was way much more. But they weren't doing it. They weren't even doing the bare minimum tithe. They were hoarding that to themselves while there were needs around them. And God says "you're stealing from me. Everything you have, I've given you. And when you're not using what I've given you to share with others, to share with my people, to support my mission, you're actually stealing from me." And God says when you cease to be generous to God and His people and His mission you're saying **I gain, the kingdom loses.**

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And this is why, according to OT law - if you stole from someone, you gotta go make it right. You need to go make, as they call it, **restitution** - which was about not just giving back what you stole, but often times multiplying it out. In the civil laws of ancient Israel, the requirement for someone who was guilty of stealing was full restitution, or sometimes even more than full restitution.

- So in the Bible if someone stole your ox, restitution looks like giving back 5 oxen
- Or if someone stole a sheep you gotta give back 4 sheep in return

Which when you think about it reveals something beautiful - that when you're stolen from, what you've lost is more than what was actually taken from you - you've lost your sense of security. Being taken advantage of dehumanizes and devalues you so something like restitution - and over-and-beyond paying back helps to restore the humanity that the person lost.

This is why, if you grew up in church, you may have heard about the story of **Zaccheus in Luke 19**. You know, Zaccheus was a wee little man. And he's a tax collector who's legally stolen from other people to get rich. And then he encounters Jesus and he says, "Jesus I want to follow you, everything I've stolen from others I'm gonna pay back four times that amount."

Because Zaccheus in his stealing and taking from others in all sorts of ways discovered something that was of **far greater value** - He encountered the living generous God who loves Him more than anything else in the world.

And the good news, wherever you are, is that despite all of our breaking of this command - **God's generosity did not stop**. That in all the subtle ways we can take and steal and rob, **God out of His abundance kept giving to us**, and the best picture we see of that is when He gave us His Son Jesus.

In this beautiful twist of irony, when we were taking even from God, God takes something from us - our sin, our guilt, all our shame, all of our wrongdoing. You see **at great cost to Him, He lost so that we could gain**.

Isaiah 53:4-5

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; but he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace

---upper room time!---

On the Cross...

- Jesus loses His power so that by the Spirit, we might gain His power
- Jesus loses the presence of His Father so that we might know the full love and acceptance of the Father
- Jesus loses His life so that we could gain our new lives found in Him - no longing living in this scarcity mindset but an abundant mindset that sees God as this good and gracious giver

You see, when **sin makes us takers, Jesus transforms us into givers**.

most people are out to get as much as they can. Accumulate, consume, increase, advance, climb. Jesus makes us givers. Looking to give as much as we can.

in an age of social darwinism - survival of the fittest - we live for another age - the age of the kingdom - where Jesus says the good life is found in laying down your life

WE've bought by the blood of Jesus is to live in this abundant reality, we're invited into the party through a generous host - and so now we through our generosity to get to invite others in too.

So as Christians, we are those that if we take something, we make restitution. We go and we make it right.

Because God's been generous to us, this means as we go when someone is hurting or in need, it's on us to help take people's burdens off of them because that's what Jesus did for us.

So I don't know where we might need to repent here today. I don't know what restitution you might need to pursue with anyone you have stolen from, as an act of obedience. I don't know if you are more tempted to steal through greed or laziness.

But I do know that if you are in Christ, through the miracle of salvation when God looks at you He sees the radiant generosity and perfection of the resurrected King Jesus instead of your acts of theft. I know that He is not only comfortable having you, the former thief, at His table but He went to great lengths to get you there and is delighted that you are there.

I don't pretend to understand the depths of goodness in a Father who would adopt a bunch of thieves like us. But I know He did send His one and only Son, to hang and die between two thieves to purchase your salvation and mine. And I know that He has given us His Spirit to convict, guide, help, and conform us into the image of Jesus, to help us live this out, to be givers instead of takers.

If that's not good news, I don't know what is.

Pray