

Adult Lesson Ten

Posted: No Thieving!!

You shall not steal (Exodus 20:15, NRSV).



Grand theft auto. Pick-pocketing. Grand larceny. Income-tax evasion. Pilfering. Plagiarism. We've sub-divided, cross-referenced, and narrowed this eighth commandment to literally hundreds of smaller terms, both felonies and misdemeanors. What we consider in classes ranging from income-tax law to ethics, God covers in just one line-"You shall not steal." A study of the Hebrew word translated here as "steal" shows the full range of applications of this law. It is used for devious business practices, well-planned robberies, pilfering of small items, and heists of large ones. There is no narrowing of the topic. If we are to stand in relationship with God in a community of faith, we are not to steal. Period.

Today a false dichotomy between private and public thievery springs up. We consider it horrible to break into a house and take the owner's property. To steal from public institutions-the IRS, an employer, etc.-is at least understandable if not "okay." "They haven't paid me what I'm worth to them for years." "They have no right to take 35% of what I make to give to some deadbeat who doesn't even look for a job." "Tithe? That pastor has to make more than I do." And so it becomes easy to rationalize stealing from the job, the government, and God. The problem is that there is no addendum, asterisk, or exception tacked onto the end of this commandment. If we live in relationship with God, we don't steal.

OBJECTIVES

- Examine the biblical mandate against stealing.
- Establish that stealing reflects on the type of person you are.
- Challenge class members to consider if they are stealing.
- Outline how to make retribution for stealing.

SCRIPTURE

- Exodus 20:15
- Matthew 15:16-19
- Luke 19:1-10

WHAT YOU NEED

- Copies of Handout #10.1 for everyone in the class
- Copies of Handout #10.2 for everyone in the class
- Chalk/chalkboard; marker/dry erase board; or something else to write on

Part 1 - For the mouths of babes...

Begin class by telling a story about stealing something when you were a kid. If you don't have any, feel free to use mine. **(When I was five I was in the grocery store with my parents. We walked by the health food section where they had a display of dried fruit and other health-mix items in bulk that you could scoop out and pay for by the pound. I reached into the dried banana bin and grabbed a couple to shove into my mouth. My dad saw me, and I received perhaps the longest lecture of my childhood. I learned a big lesson that day. Stealing, either large or small, is wrong.)** After telling your own story, ask the class members if they have any "stealing" stories from when they were kids. Be sure to examine the consequences of stealing.

Part 2 - Seedy CD?

Have someone read Exodus 20:15. Then distribute Handout #10.1. The answer to the question on the worksheet is, of course, that every one of the items on this list is forbidden. Use this list as a springboard to discuss some of the more current ethical issues the internet raises. Be sure and discuss music and movie swapping programs (which is the ability to download music and films to a local computer from the Internet). Ask **How many of you have used these swapping programs? Do you think that they are wrong?** The answers will probably vary widely. Younger classes will almost certainly have used both programs. Some members in older classes will probably not even be aware of their existence. The Internet now makes it possible for users to "pirate" music and movies in electronic format—thus, depriving (or at least inhibiting) the "owners" of the material (music and film companies) an opportunity to receive an income for retail sales.

Explain **The word that we translate "steal" in this verse is used throughout the Old Testament for someone taking anything that is not his or hers. Intellectual and artistic property is some of the hardest to deal with, but if it is someone else's ideas, music, or other form of artwork, it belongs to them or whomever they have sold it to (music contracts, movie companies, etc.) To take it without paying is stealing from them every bit as much as breaking into their businesses or homes and taking their belongings. Music companies deal in sounds. To take their sounds without paying is stealing.** You may have to adapt this example for your class, but the same is true of copying sheet music without permission, copying software, "taking" someone else's idea at work, or making an extra copy of a movie when it is rented.

Part 3 - Stealing from the heart

Read or ask someone to read Matthew 15:16-19. Ask **According to this verse, where does the desire to steal come from?** (From the heart.) **What does this do to a person?** (Defiles him or her.) Ask **Do you think it tells you anything about a person if you see him or her stealing? Have you ever witnessed someone stealing that shocked or surprised you?**

Allow them to answer these questions and then tell this true story.

I paid my way through seminary waiting tables at a barbecue restaurant. All employees got a fifty percent discount on food. One day a fellow seminary employee and I were ordering at the same time. I got a sandwich with fries and potato salad. He looked at me like I was crazy and said, "Hey, man, all you have to do is order the sandwich and then ask the guys in the back to put fries and potato salad with it." After he walked away a fellow waitress looked at me and said, "And he's going to be a minister. Scary." Was she that concerned about the fifty cents this cost the restaurant? Probably not. Then what was the issue? (Just as Jesus points out in the verses above, stealing, in small or large amounts, says something about the heart of the person that does it. If someone is willing to steal small amounts from their employer, chances are they would steal more if they thought they could get away with it. As Christians we must also be aware that what we do represents Christ to others.)



Say **Chances are all of us have taken part in some form of theft at some time in our lives. Some of you may not have even considered some of the things that you were doing as stealing until this lesson. The question becomes, how do we make it right?**

Part 4 - Zacchaeus was a wee little man

Say **There is one story in the Bible about a person who made restitution for stealing, a story we tell our children but sometimes forget about ourselves. Zacchaeus.** Ask if anyone can remember the story of Zacchaeus, then have someone read Luke 19:1-10. Explain that tax collectors were allowed to collect as much money as possible from the people in their area. Whatever they collected over the prescribed tax was theirs to keep. Zacchaeus apparently had collected too much, but he was willing to pay back four times what he had stolen. Say **We are not told in this verse that we must pay back four times what we owe. The point seems to be that once we are accepted by Christ, we do have to make restitution for that which we've done wrong, including stealing.**

Divide the class into three groups and give each group a situation from Handout #10.2. Give the groups five to seven minutes to review the situations, than have someone in each group explain the options and benefits they discussed for each scenario. After they have done this say **What constitutes stealing is not as black and white as it once was, but the call of the Ten Commandments is still on our lives. If we are to be a people of God, we cannot take anything that does not belong to us. Not only are there negatives attached to stealing, but there are positives to living honestly and making up for past mistakes.**

Close in prayer. Be sure to allow for a time of commitment to make restitution for what was taken in the past.

What Counts?!?

Take a moment to consider which of these things the eighth commandment forbids.

1. Grand theft auto.
2. Cheating on an exam.
3. Breaking into a house.
4. Using various software to "pirate" or trade music or movies.
5. Buying one ticket but going to two movies.
6. Taking supplies from work for the kids to use at school.
7. "Under-estimating" on your tax returns.
8. Plagiarizing a paper or report.
9. Stealing a colleague's idea and turning it in as one's own.
10. A waiter not reporting all of his or her tips.
11. Downloading movies off the web.
12. "Fixing" the cable to get pay channels free.
13. Stock trading with inside information.
14. Installing software one hasn't purchased.



Case Studies

Situation 1 - The Repentant Roofer

John is a college student and works as a roofer for income. His boss, Chad, pays him in cash. Chad doesn't withhold for taxes, nor does he submit anything to the IRS. John has recently become a Christian and it is time for him to file his income tax return. He figures that he has probably made \$15,000 in the past year. John feels like he should file, but he doesn't know how he can without getting Chad in trouble. What should he do? What will be the positives for him if he pays the income tax?

Situation 2 - Timmy the Tither

Tim is 40 years old and has been attending church with his wife and three children for ten years. Although he regularly drops something in the offering plate, he knows it is far less than 10%. Lately, through a series of sermons on stewardship and through his personal devotional time, Tim has felt convicted about not tithing. He wonders how much he owes from the past or does he even need to go back and pay tithe for his income in the last ten years? What do you think? What are his options? What are the positives with each option?

Situation 3 - Pirate Paul

Paul is a huge music fan. His CD collection had been up to over 400 until he discovered an online music-swapping site. Able to download all of his collection off of the Internet, he sold his collection of CDs at a used CD store and no longer buys any new music. He thought this was a great situation until a recent Sunday school lesson prompted him to consider that he might be stealing from the artists and music companies. He feels like he owes them something, but he's not sure if he does or how he should go about repaying what he has stolen. What do you think? If he repays the artists in some way, what benefits will that give him?