

Stop Thief!

Readings: Leviticus 6:2-5; Titus 2:9-14; Matthew 6:9-14.

"Thou shalt not steal." Unlike a number of the other commandments, this needs little explanation, it is quite understandable as a command. Stop thieving. It is morally understandable, we understand that it is wrong to take as your own that which rightfully belongs to another. Most of us would not enter another's house and take something, and hope that it would not happen to us. It is biblically understandable. Not only is it condemned in the Commandments and throughout the Old Testament, in the New Testament it is seen as one of the sins that comes out of the human heart (Matthew 7:21) and thieves will not enter the kingdom of God (1Cor 6:10). If we all agree on this, that stealing is morally and biblically wrong is saying "Stop Thief" all that needs to be said?

Perhaps, but there are issues that stealing raises which are worth pursuing in a little more depth. I would like to consider modern attitudes as to what constitutes stealing, the Bible's teaching about stealing which will lead to a biblical view of possessions in general.

HOMER VS LISA AND THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

One of the best expositions of the sin of stealing I know of is a *Simpsons* episode. For \$50 a man offers to hook Homer up to Cable TV so that it will then be free. Homer is convinced to do so by a leaflet: *So you've decided to steal cable*. It states: "Myth: Cable piracy is wrong. Fact: Cable companies are big faceless corporations, which makes it okay."

Later the family go to church and the children in Sunday School are being taught about hell. Miss Albright, their teacher, tells the children the way to avoid hell is to obey the Ten Commandments. Now this is not a view that we support at St. David's. The commandments were given to Israel after they have been saved from Egypt, they were a response to salvation not the means of being saved. Likewise we are saved from Hell by Jesus and we are considering the commandments to consider how we should live in response to salvation in Christ. With that caveat, on with the story.

Lisa is particularly worried by the command "Thou shalt not steal", her conscience hassling her about watching the pirated cable. So she goes to her minister, Rev. Lovejoy, to discuss if stealing is ever right, say for a man to steal bread to feed his starving family. She subsequently decides that she will not watch the offending technology.

Meanwhile there is a big fight coming up on Cable and Homer starts inviting people to come and watch it at his place. Lisa tells Homer of her decision which causes Homer to muse "There's something wrong with that kid. She's so moral. Why can't she be more like ... well, not like Bart..."

The next day, the cable man comes into the living room as Homer flips through the channels. Homer says "Hey, how'd you get in here?" The man replies "Oh, your door wasn't locked in any serious way." The man offers to sell Homer a stolen car stereo, and Homer tosses him out. The man offers to see Flanders, the Simpson's neighbour, instead. Homer says, "He's not home." The man responds, "Even better..." This leads Homer to say to his wife "Marge, we can't be too careful. There are thieves everywhere. And I'm not talking about the small forgivable stuff." Then he starts to put bars around the house.

Later that evening people start to arrive to watch the fight. However each person who arrives creates difficulties for Homer. As Moe, the owner of the bar, arrives Homer frantically has to hide all the mugs he has swiped from the bar. Then Mr Burns, his boss arrives. Homer cries "Quick, Bart! Hide the stuff I borrowed from work!". "Borrowed?" Bart quizzically replies. Homer concedes "All, right, that stuff I stole from work."

Then the Police to arrive to watch what they know is an illegal. Meanwhile Lisa continues her silent protest and finally Homer's conscience finally gets to him and after the fight, despite Bart's protestations, Homer disconnects the cable, blacking out the whole of Springfield in the process.

ATTITUDES TO STEALING

Different kinds of stealing.

Apart from being very funny this *Simpsons* episode as a parable showing how our society can have mixed values in relation to stealing. Of course it's wrong but...

Big faceless Corporations

The tax office, an insurance company, the government, Aurora, Hollywood, or any other big faceless corporation are fair game surely. To this we must hear "Thou shalt not steal."

"Borrowing from work"

Then there is the attitude to the place of work. If we take something from work for our own use well that's not really stealing, it's "borrowing", as Homer would say. I mean they would never really miss it, would they? It's in the small forgivable stuff category? This kind of "borrowing" may include excessive use of the phone, fax or internet for personal use, and the way we use our time at work. It may even include the way we "borrow" from our family members.

We need to be reminded of what Paul said in Titus, about bring honour to our Saviour God through not pilfering. We are to be as honest as the day is long, and the day is to be as long as it should be, knowing another day is coming..

Perhaps we can't tick the "Thou shalt not steal" box as easily as we thought.

BIBLICAL TEACHING RELATING TO STEALING

Restitution

The Old Testament not only teaches not to steal but how to deal with those who do steal. Our reading from Leviticus 6 shows the seriousness of stealing in its various forms, as being unfaithful to the Lord, but also shows that the Old Testament law was just as eager to see the victim compensated as the criminal punished, this was part of justice. We may have to wonder if our legal system needs to reconsider this part of justice. Usually even if the thief is caught you remain robbed.

More personally, such teaching should teach us how we should deal with people that we have wronged. We should make restitution where possible for what we have done.

People more important than possessions

The Old Testament also shows that people are more important than possessions. The punishment for all forms of theft was restitution except one, kidnapping which had the death penalty. Whatever we make of capital punishment does this have something to say to our own legal system which can hand out much greater punishment to property crimes than crimes against people? Such a principal may also give us a hint at an answer to the question as to whether it is right for a man to steal bread for his starving family. People are more important than possessions.

BIBLICAL VIEW OF POSSESSIONS

A Problem for the Rich

The Bible however is less concerned with the problem of poor people stealing to survive, than it is with rich people stealing, plundering and oppressing the poor for their own benefit (Isaiah 3:14, Ezekiel 22:29). These are people who take from others, not because of need, but because they can, they have the power. The prophets of Israel stood against the smooth operators, the clever business men of their time and called it what was, robbery, oppression.

Ownership of property

Behind the condemnation of the rich is firstly the biblical understanding of justice. There is a surprising verse in Isaiah 61:8 where God says that he loves justice, nothing surprising there, but that he hates robbery, which also is not surprising in itself. The surprise is that the opposite of robbery is not ownership but justice. What matters in biblical terms is justice. From this comes a biblical understanding of possessions.

Yes, it is unjust for someone to steal, but it is also unjust for someone to have an abundance while others have nothing. So in the Old Testament law it was illegal for someone to steal crops from a field. However those who owned the field were not to harvest to the edges of the field so that there would be some left over for the poor who could not afford to buy grain. (Leviticus 23:22). Similarly it was illegal to charge interest to a fellow Israelite who was in need of money (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:36-37; Deuteronomy 23:19-20), they were not allowed to profit from the need of another. Also employers were to be prompt in their payments, indeed to hold back wages is equated with robbery (Leviticus 19:13). Over all this was the law of Jubilee which was a time every 50 years when all debts were cancelled and land returned to its original owners. All of this was to limit the power of the rich to hold all the cards, and concentrate wealth for their own benefit, such a situation was unjust.

So for the Old Testament a righteous, or good man was not simply someone who didn't steal but who actively does good. "He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery, but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked." (Ezekiel 18:7)

The New Testament picks this up, it emphasises that the positive aspect of not stealing is to actively love (Romans 13:9-10). This biblical view of possessions is perhaps best put in Ephesians 4:28. "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." The purpose of having possessions is to be generous and share with those less fortunate.

When we see things in this light the answer to the question about a poor person being forced to steal to feed his family is that the situation should not arise for they are being looked after by the community. The command then not to steal understood in a biblical context does not support the idea of "I, me, mine" so prevalent in our day, but rather the ideal of "How can I help?"

Application of these ideals

Making this connection between stealing and the denial of justice starts to raise all sorts of issues that we should start to think through for the Old Testament law makes it very clear that the profit is not all that matters. The bottom line is in effect not the bottom line. Justice and community are the bottom line, that people, especially those at the bottom are being looked after. So:

- is it just that some of the poorest countries pay more in debt repayment than they receive in foreign aid?
- is it just that poor countries be forced to plant cash crops such as coffee and then international companies push the price down to a 10th of expected price simply so we in the West can drink coffee cheaply.

- is it just that large companies delay paying their debts thus forcing smaller companies out of business?
- is it just that international companies can move their profits around so they end up paying an effective tax rate of 6% as Newscorp did a few years ago. I am reminded of the quip of "I can't wait till I earn enough so that I don't have to pay income tax!"
- Are executive salaries and packages just?
- Is it just that State revenues are propped up through gambling, which effectively taxes the poor?

It is easy to rail against such injustice especially when they are big faceless corporations but we need to recognise the complexity of the situation. "The commandment confronts a modern culture which accepts greed as a style of self affirmation and whose systems of exchanging property are so complex that recognizing the difference between stealing and dealing is a lost art. ... One yearns for the day when a thief was a mere rogue not an executive in a three piece suit." (Lewis Smedes, Mere Morality, 191.)

Further more we are involved. Either directly or through super funds many of us are owners of these faceless corporations, with all the moral ambiguity which that brings. However this doesn't mean we should be silent. We need to do what we can to remind our culture of the true bottom line, justice. We should, for instance, congratulate the Church of England for its recent move on payday loan sharks with effective interest rates of 5000%. We can ponder what would we do here in Tasmania?

Closer to home, are our houses full of the nick knacks of modern life and getting full yet we do not have enough money to help others? Are we so concerned to build up equity for our own futures that by our frugality we deny a future to others?

While the Bible encourages us to make provision for the future does it does not encourage us to work only for our own benefit. Perhaps we need to scale down our expectations of our future plans so that we can help others. As we are thinking about our possessions, are we thinking about justice or ownership?

THE REALITY OF STEALING

This is a big challenge to us because it challenges us not only at the level of our in built greed and selfishness but also as to where we put our trust. We want to trust in money, in our stocks, in our super and so on as giving us security for the future, as the adverts tell us. We need to heed the warning of Scripture. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Matthew 6:19-20)

Stealing is a reality and the Bible uses the reality of stealing to remind us of the inherently unstable nature of earthly possessions. We may think we have adequately planned for the future only to be sadly disappointed. There is no security to be found there.

As many of you know I am a collector, I have collected many things in my time, currently CD's, previously soccer magazines, war books, Biggles books but perhaps the strangest thing that I have collected was batteries. As a child I had loads of them, some brightly coloured, some square, some round, red, blue, orange. And I kept them in a big metal box in my cupboard and I used to like getting them out, feeling their weight, and sticking my tongue on the square ones because it felt funny. But one day I got my collection out and something horrible had happened. One of the batteries had leaked and in the metal box the resulting chemical reaction meant that all the batteries had leaked, and my collection was now a red orange gooey mess. That which was precious was gone, lost

In the end that is what will happen to all our possessions, they will fade, rust or be stolen. (I was going to make a similar point with a set of cufflinks, but they have been misplaced)

We cannot trust earthly goods, collections or fortunes for they are inherently unreliable, they do not offer true security, only God can do that. We are to be responsible with what we have been given but we are never to trust in them, for they can always disappear.

Rather we are to trust in God for the future and use what possessions that we have for the good of others and for justice and thus show on earth that our faith is in God and our treasure is in heaven where we will never hear the cry of "Stop Thief."