

## **'You shall not steal'**

### **(Exodus 20:15)**

#### **A thief at work (2 Samuel 11:1-12:25)**

Today's sermon is on the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment – You shall not steal.

The way I want to address this topic is to start by having a look at a well known example of stealing in the Old Testament.

I want to look 2 Samuel 11 and 12.

This passage contains the story of King David's attempt to steal another man's wife.

This story will give us a great picture of what is wrong with stealing.

It will also help us come up with a definition of stealing.

So let's get started.

Let me give you a summary of the story.

2 Samuel 11 tells us that spring had come to ancient Palestine.

And spring was traditionally the season when Kings went out to war.

However, 2 Samuel 11 tells us that King David did not go out to war this year.

Instead he sent his general while he stayed at home.

On one particular afternoon he was rose from his bed late in the afternoon or early evening.

He wandered out onto his palace roof.

And from this vantage point he saw a beautiful woman naked and bathing.

David asked about the woman only to find out she was married to one of his best fighting men.

However, he sent for her and slept with her.

Weeks pass after this event.

The woman comes to realise that she is pregnant and sends a message to David to tell him.

David panics and comes up with a plan that will save his guilt – he sends for Uriah the Hittite and tries to get him to go home and sleep with his wife.

However, Uriah is a noble and godly man and refuses to take the benefits of being at home while the rest of God's army are out waging war.

So, when David's initial plan fails he goes to Plan B – he asks his general to arrange for Uriah to be killed in battle.

At this point it all looks so neat – no adverse publicity, not loose strings...

And so Bathsheba goes through the customary period of mourning and is then married to David.

However, at the end of 2 Samuel 11 the writer opens up heaven for us and lets us know that God is unhappy with what has gone on.

And when God is not pleased, you can be sure that sooner or later you will find out about it

And so it is that in chapter 12 the Lord sends Nathan the Prophet to David

And Nathan comes bearing an innocuous story.

It goes like this...

*Two men were in a city, David*

*A rich man and a poor man*

*The rich man had very many flocks and herds*

*The poor man had nothing except for one little ewe lamb which he had bought  
He raised it and it grew up with him and his sons  
It ate his bread  
Drank from his cup  
And slept in his lap  
It was a daughter to him  
A visitor came to the rich man  
He found it a pity to take any of his own's herd to prepare for his guest  
So he took the poor man's sheep away, killed it, and prepared it as a meal for the man who was  
visiting him*

David listens to the story with interest and rising anger.  
He understandably identifies himself with the poor man  
And so he takes on his God appointed role as judge and pronounces sentence...  
Two things must be done:

- (1) The rich man must die, and
- (2) What was taken must be restored 4-fold

The reason for the judgment is: "because the man showed no pity"  
And so it is that the trap closes on the unsuspecting prey  
With one gentle tug Nathan removes the veil  
He holds a mirror up to David's face and says: "You are the man!"  
At this point the whole story is made public and David's punishment from God is proclaimed.  
Nathan hits David with it.

Speaking the words of God to him, he says:

*David, I have been so generous to you  
I have given you the kingdom with all its benefits  
If this hadn't been enough I would have given you more  
And yet you have despised my generosity  
You have despised me  
Most seriously you have despised me by committing theft  
In murdering Uriah you have stolen his wife  
You have behaved like a common thief who kills to get his prize  
You have been a thief like the rich man in the parable  
You will be punished for these things  
And the punishment will fit the offence  
Since you took up the sword, the sword will never depart from your house  
Since you stole another man's wife then ...  
"Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you  
"And he will lie with your wives in broad daylight  
"You did this thing in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel*

And David is floored at the words of God to him.

He repents

He deserves death but God forgives him.

Even so, he indicates that David will be punished because of what has happened.

## **What is wrong with stealing?**

There we have the story.

Now I want you to notice that although he was guilty of adultery, the two sins that God concentrates on are the sins of theft and murder.

These are the sins that are central in Nathan's parable and these are the sins that David identifies in the punishment he suggests – fourfold restitution for theft, and death for murder.

Now I want to concentrate on the first sin – the sin of theft.

What do we learn about theft from what happens in the story.

**Done in .....**

The first thing we learn is that theft is generally a deed done secretly.

It is a deed of the night.

Thieves are identified as people who sneak into other people's houses in the shelter of the night or in the shelter of the absence of the householder.

**..... and .....**

Second, we learn that theft is a deed which is unjust and underhand.

Uriah had done nothing to deserve the theft of his wife.

And what David did was very underhand and blameworthy.

There was nothing worthy in it.

There was nothing public in it.

David took advantage of his power and position to do a terrible deed.

**A breach of .....**

Third, we learn that theft is a breach of relationship with God.

Nathan makes very clear to David that God had looked after David very well.

He had given him much and he would have given him even more.

And yet David wanted to overstep God.

He wanted something that God had not given him and that he would like.

And so he broke God's law.

And in doing so, he broke relationship with God.

**A breach of .....**

Fourth, we learn that theft is a break of relationship with other human beings.

David had a relationship with Uriah.

Uriah was a noble man who had the best interests of his king in mind.

David took this man's trust and shattered it.

In self-centred pride he killed this man to get something that he wanted.

And so he broke relationship with his fellow human.

Understand what I'm saying.

God made humans to friends with God and with each other.

Stealing breaks the bond between a human and God.

Stealing breaks the bond between a human and another human.

**A denial of .....**

But there is one more thing about stealing.

I have already hinted at it but we need to spell it out more clearly.

You see, Nathan makes it clear that God had been very rich in generosity toward David.

He had showered blessing after blessing upon David.

And if David had wanted more, God would have continued to be rich and generous toward David.

David's act of theft is therefore a denial of God's generosity.

It looks at what God has given and says – 'I'm not satisfied with what God has given me. I want more and I'm going to take them for myself.'

When a person steals, they are therefore saying that God is not as generous as they would like.

It is a denial of God's generosity.

## **A definition of stealing**

Okay, we have now looked at this example of theft.

We have drawn out some of the reasons why God regards theft as against his will.

Let's now try and pull these things together by coming up with a ballpark definition of stealing.

Stealing can be defined as...

An act that springs from dissatisfaction with what God has given us and that results in the taking of an object or person or right that is important to someone else in order to satisfy your own desires. Such an act is grossly self centred and is therefore a sin against God and our fellow humans.

## **The result of stealing**

The passage in 2 Samuel also shows us what is obvious in the rest of the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament theft is punished by God.

The punishments are somewhat diverse and range from death through to the making of restitution.

In other words, the result of stealing is judgment and punishment.

This judgment or punishment is designed to acknowledge the awfulness of the sin to God and fellow humans.

It is also designed to attempt to set right the wrong at a human level by restoring property or making restitution.

## **A New Testament perspective**

### ***A command for Christians***

Now we will move into the New Testament and see what it has to say about stealing.

First, Jesus and his apostles regard the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment as being valid for Christians.

Stealing is still wrong.

It is still prohibited.

If you'd like to see some examples of this, you could turn to the conversation that Jesus has with a rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22.

*17 And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honour your father and mother.' " 20 And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." 21 And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." 22 Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (ESV)*

### **Positive as well as negative**

Having said this, passages such as Ephesians 4:28 and Romans 13:9 tell us more than the Old Testament.

Let's have a look at Ephesians 4:28...

*28 Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. (ESV)*

Notice what is being said.

On the negative side, Paul tells the Ephesian Christians what they must not do – they must no longer steal.

On the other side, Paul tells them the positive side as well.

Rather than stealing, they are to do the positive action of working so that they have something to share with anyone in need.

In the Old Testament it was clear that stealing breached relationship with God and with others.

The New Testament stresses something else.

It says that the desire to steal should be replaced by something else that positively responds to God's great work toward them in Jesus.

Stealing breaks relationships.

Working and giving to others builds relationships.

The thing the Ephesian thieves used to desire was material wealth itself.

Now that they have come to know Jesus and have experienced God's grace they now desire that others experience it as well.

And so they reflect God's great love to them in using material goods to demonstrate God's great love.

Giving is what Jesus did.

And giving results in the exact opposite of stealing – it builds relationships rather than destroying them.

Now let's have a brief look at Romans 13:8-10.

*8 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (ESV)*

Notice what is being said.

The commandments were all prohibitions – don't do this, don't do that.

The great news of Jesus positively inspires us to do much more than offer prohibitions.

The great news of Jesus positively inspires us to love as we have been loved.

And if we do this then we will fulfil all laws we find in the Old Testament.

For love is the fulfilling of the law.

### **Today**

#### **Do not.....**

Having said these things, I'd like to now move on to talk about us in the modern world.

No matter where you go in the Bible, the advice is the same – do not steal.

And these words are as broad as they sound.

And their application is as broad as it sounds.

We are not to steal.

This includes those token small thefts from the workplace – the taking of small things thinking that it is okay to do so because everyone else does it.

It includes the entering of false times in work timesheets, which amounts to theft.

It includes those deceits in our annual tax return.

It includes the taking of Aboriginal children from their parents.

It includes the taking of a husband or a wife from another person.

It includes defrauding others of their proper rights.

And it includes breaking into other people's houses to plunder them.

Such acts, no matter how small or how large they be, are deeds that are unfair and unjust.

They betray the confidence of other people and therefore breach relationships with fellow human beings.

They also betray the relationship we have with God through Christ were we say we have in Christ all that is necessary for life and godliness.

Such acts also deny that we have experienced and understood God's great generosity to us in Jesus.

To steal from another is to say that God has defrauded us.

It is to deny his goodness and generosity.

**Do.....**

But this is not all that can be said to us.

You see, the New Testament urges us to positive actions.

It urges us – Do be like God.

In other words, we claim that we have come to know God in Christ.

We are people who believe that although we were God's enemies he acted for us in surprising and unobligated love and generosity.

He sent his Son to be atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Since we know God's generosity, we are called upon to reflect this knowledge in our hearts, in our words, and in our actions.

This means all sorts of practical things.

It means that we will not covet or desire what others have.

It means that we work hard so that we can give to others who do not have what we have.

It means that we use money to win friends for God and to help those who are disadvantaged.

It means that we speak out wherever we see injustice and wrong being perpetrated.

It means that we do everything to enhance and protect relationships, whether they be between children and their parents or between wives and husbands.

It also means that we are not acquisitive.

It means that we foster an attitude of rejoicing in what God has given us rather than attempting to supplement his goodness through wrong actions.

It means that we act like Jesus who came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom.

Please understand what I am saying.

We are Christians.

And it is not enough for us to say, 'You shall not steal'.

Rather, we should go on to say, 'We have an obligation to love as we have been loved.'