

you shall not steal

let's pray.

Following last Sunday's teaching on the 7th Commandment, "*You shall not commit adultery*", I received a brief and kind email from one of you – thanking me for my teaching on such a challenging commandment, and conveying the encouragement that the next commandment should, at least, be much easier.

Exodus 20:15 – **the 8th Commandment – "*You shall not steal.*"**

I smiled as I read the email, because if there is one thing I've learned in studying the commandments (and I hope I've learned far more than one thing – even just for your sake) – it's this: there is no such thing as **an easy commandment**.

If there was, it probably wouldn't need to be included.

Although, I guess, one could interpret 'easy' as meaning less complicated, more straightforward. Which some of the commandments are.

But, unfortunately, I wouldn't include the 8th Commandment – the commandment about stealing – in the easy, less complicated, more straightforward category.

At least not after some real time with it.

But before, we get into it, let me read this commandment for us one more time, but flowing out of **Exodus 20:2** – the ***preface*** to all of the commandments.

If you've joined us mid-series, it's important to know that none of the commandments stand on their own. They all flow out of what God says in **Exodus 20:2** – *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery..."*

Then and only then, do we read and hear any and all of the commandments.

Why? Why does this matter?

Because it helps us remember or realize that the commandments are spoken by **a God who brings freedom** – to a people He has **set free** – rescued from the oppression of Egypt, rescued from a life of **slavery** at the hands of the Egyptians and their gods.

Which means that the commandments, rather than being a means of limiting or restricting their freedom (and ours), they are actually the means by which the Israelites (and us) can **live free** and **stay free**...

They are, ultimately, **the Way of Freedom**. Spoken by **the God who frees us** – who frees us from slavery of idolatry.

And so, as with all the commandments, this is the case for the 8th Commandment...

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery..."

"You shall not steal."

To which must of us respond, "Yeah. Of course".

As far as we can see, this one's pretty straightforward.

If I were to ask you, **"Have you ever robbed anyone?"** I suspect it wouldn't be that hard for you to answer me. ***The question isn't that complicated.***

I know for me, coming to this commandment makes me think of where theft has touched my life.

First and foremost, I think of the time that my guitar – my beloved ***acoustic Guild Dreadnought guitar*** – was stolen from the back of my '83 Honda-matic wagon – on a busy downtown street in broad daylight in Vancouver. Smart thieves. *The guitar was worth more than my car – and easier to grab!*

I ***loved*** that guitar and I was ***so cheesed*** that it was stolen.

Or I think of the time in my high school days – when one morning, I emerged from our garage on my bike, heading out the door for school – and discovered the rear window of my brother's car laying on the grass – and all of his loose possessions stolen. They didn't even break the window. They just popped it out of its casing and stole everything they could see.

He was so frustrated.

And all the more so, when the same thieves came back and did it again – **one week later.**

Crazy.

But if I'm really honest, this commandment humbles me because it makes me think about all the times **I was guilty of petty theft** – in my middle-school years – filling the pockets of my Taiga jacket (I had a lot of pockets) with small items from the corner-store when the cashier wasn't looking.

[Let it be said, as I think I've mentioned before, in time, God put his finger on this in my life and I went back to those stores, confessed and sought to make restitution – *to the shock of many a store owner.*]

If we had time, I'm sure we could go around the room and tell all sorts of stories – of how we've experienced the 8th Commandment in some way (on either end of the equation).

But here's the problem – ***if this is what dominates our minds when we read, hear or think of the 8th Commandment, then we're actually missing the reality of this commandment.***

And I say this fully aware that this is how I've always read it.

So, how are we to understand the 8th Commandment?

Well, first of all, whenever we're reading and studying scripture, it's important that ***before*** we apply it to ***our*** story, we make sure we're hearing it well within ***its own story***, right?

And for the Commandments, the story ***is the Exodus!***

It's humbling to me how often I have thought of the 10 Commandments as almost stand-alone revelation. But they're not. None of the commandments exist apart from the story in which they emerge.

And yet, how often have we **not** taken this story into account as we've read these commandments?

All that to say, we need to consider the experience and impact of **stealing** within the story of Israel and the Exodus.

An experience and impact that **utterly defined and dominated** their lives – more than we've probably ever considered.

When **we** think of theft and stealing, we tend to think of it as something kids do, or that the poor do to the rich, that the Have-Nots do to the Haves...

But the overwhelming emphasis in scripture (particularly in the Old Testament) is not as much on the poor stealing from the rich, but on how the rich steal from the poor, how the powerful rob the weak and vulnerable.

Which, if we stop to think about it, is exactly what the **Israelites** experienced in Egypt for **400 years**.

Their lives had been **stolen** from them.

Their land, their freedom, their youth, their children, their dreams, their gifts, their capacities – **stolen from them** – all so that the Egyptian elite could live a life of luxury and privilege, comfort and ease.

The glory of Egypt was built on the back of slaves.

The glory of Egypt was **only possible** because of how Egypt **stole** the land, life and strength of the vulnerable, the poor and the weak – the Israelites – and many others...

People made vulnerable, poor and weak **by the thieving ways of the Egyptians...** By how the Egyptians **exploited the vulnerability and robbed from the weak.**

This insight has reframed this commandment for me!

For the newly rescued Israelites, just months after the Exodus, standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai, hearing God speak the 10 Commandments, the **trauma** of Egypt – **a life stolen - where they had been robbed of everything** – would still be so fresh in their minds and hearts, even in their weary hands and backs.

Imagine you are a subsistence farmer in northern Africa.

You own land and you work the land. It's all you have, but it's yours. You can provide for your family, and maybe offer some employment to others going through hard times.

But every 5 years, there's a drought. (This was very common in the Ancient Near East).

And no matter how hard you work, your land reaps no harvest.

And you need to eat and feed your kids and aging parents, and your sister's family, whose husband died a few years back.

And not far from you is a rich and powerful kingdom – Egypt – that has **excess**.

And so, you go to them, hat in hand, asking for mercy, for help.

Which they give you. **But there is no mercy.**

You can have what you need, but **only in exchange for your land.**

Which is all you have, but what else can you do? You have to feed your kids, and aging parents, and your sister's family.

So, you surrender your land.

And you keep working it, maybe the same land – but now it's not yours. And for the "privilege" of working the land, you now pay exorbitant fees ("taxes") to the deep pockets of Egypt. The kingdom that already has more than enough.

But the land only reaps so much – and now you only get to keep a portion.

And then another drought comes...

And you go to the Egyptian landowners to ask for mercy.

And they agree to give you what you need, **but there is no mercy.**

You can have what you need, **but now in exchange for your labor.**

And so you sell yourself into service – for five or ten years – so you can feed your family...

But when the term is up, you are worse off than when you started, and you and your children become slaves for life – **just to stay alive...**

With no land. No rights. No worth. No freedom. No future.

Just a labor force for a kingdom that already has more than enough.

In the ancient world, **stealing** made vulnerable people more vulnerable. And specifically, **it made people vulnerable to poverty** – which, in turn, made them vulnerable **to slavery**.

*Which is exactly what happened to the Israelites... This was **the story of their lives.***

UNTIL!

Until YAHWEH – the God of their fathers – heard their cry, remembered His promise, and came in compassion to rescue them – to set them free.

And on Mt.Sinai, having rescued them from Egypt, YAHWEH, the God of Exodus, declared to them,

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery... You shall not steal."

In contrast to our perception of this commandment as a reasonable limit to our freedom, the Israelites would have heard this commandment as **the most beautiful and powerful word of Grace and Freedom...**

for them and for all...

Think about it: for them, just months after the Exodus, standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai, hearing God speak the 10 Commandments, the **trauma** of

Egypt – **a life stolen - where they had been robbed of everything** – would still be so fresh in their minds and hearts, and their aching backs...

And then they heard these words: **"You shall not steal."**

For 400 years, **they had been robbed** – made vulnerable by the thieving ways of the Egyptians and their gods.

But here - here was a God who showered them with mercy.

A God who rescued them in love..

A God who provided for them in the wilderness, though they offered him nothing.

*A God who provided extra on the 6th day, so **they** could rest on the 7th.*

*A God who redeemed them so that they might **share** in His glory, not just serve it.*

A God who commanded them in love – for their good and the good of others.

*A God who would not allow them to carry on the crushing and dehumanizing ways of the Egyptians – **stealing from the vulnerable, the poor and the weak.***

No, by the grace of God, they would now be a people, who *like their God*, would leave a **little extra in their field** during harvest time, so that the poor could come and find what they needed for the night... no matter if the poor was their fellow Israelite or a **foreigner** residing in their town.

They would be a people **who would not take advantage of the poor** – but would pay them their wages each day **before sunset** – so they would never go away hungry.

They would be a people who would **forgive all debts in the 50th year** – every other generation – so that **no family** – no matter what hardships life would bring – **no family** would find themselves without land indefinitely and destined for unending poverty.

This is the story that makes sense of the 8th Commandment.

The story of a God who cares for the poor and the vulnerable...

But more than that, the story of a God who **actively seeks to care** for the poor and the vulnerable, to **RESCUES** the poor and vulnerable, **and who is seeking to form a people – a community – who will share in His ways.**

"You shall not steal."

Once again, who would have thought that **four simple words** (*two words in Hebrew*) would tell us so much about God and be such good news for the Israel, for us, and for the world!

Can I hear an "Amen"?

Now, as this commandment makes clear, this is not just something for us to understand and agree with, or even celebrate! **No, this is a command for us *to live*.**

Only then does it become good news for the world – as God intended.

And that is where the trouble comes – for Israel and for us – and why we need Jesus – in more ways than one.

Because breaking the 8th Commandment isn't as unfamiliar as we'd like to think, is it?

Truth is, this is a commandment that **we all need to hear** – because we are all prone to indifference – to turning our eyes from the suffering of the poor and vulnerable, or worse, **contributing** to it.

Not that we don't ache at times over the suffering of others, but, as Jim Wallis, a wise man of justice, explains, "There is a difference between concern and compassion. Being concerned is seeing something awful happening to somebody and feeling, 'Hey, that's really too bad.' Having compassion is seeing the same thing and saying, 'I just can't let that happen to my brother.'"

Sadly, we are often more practised in **concern** than **compassion**.

But thankfully, **our God isn't**.

And in His compassionate love for **all** – **the rich and the poor** – He invites us all to **repent, believe the gospel and follow Him**. A gospel that Jesus announces in **Luke 4:18f**, with these words from **Isaiah**,

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And the beauty of this is that it's not just **what Jesus says – but it is what happens...** *Through His life and through His death, Jesus brings good news to the poor – freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and the canceling of debts.*

Which is not just good news for the poor – but **for everyone.**
Because good news for the poor involves **the conversion and transformation of the rich.**

Real hope for the conversion and transformation of the rich.

*Whether we are the rich or the poor today – **Jesus is good news!***

He is good news that where we have failed to keep this commandment, **Jesus has fulfilled it** – perfectly and completely.

And not just by not **ever** stealing from the poor, but by offering up His life in the most extravagant act of compassion and generosity this world has ever known.

In His life and in His death, **Jesus – God in the flesh – has fulfilled the commandment** for us...

That now, as we **follow Jesus**, by the power of His grace **at work in us**, we might become **a people who are alive in the compassion and generosity of God.**

A people who fulfill the commandment – "You shall not steal" –
which **in Jesus becomes, "You will not steal."**

For God's glory, for the sake of the world, and for our joy in Him.

Ok, so how? How does this happen?

How are we to respond to this commandment today?

Well, **first of all – God's invitation** is simply for us to come and **receive** God's **grace and mercy** – grace and mercy offered to us freely... with no expectation that we will ever be able to pay Him back.

Just as Jesus offered forgiveness and grace to ***the thief on the cross***, Jesus offers forgiveness and grace to us – to you and to me – in full awareness of all we've stolen from others.

So receive.

And with this, God invites us **remember**.

This is core for the Israelites in the days following the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. They were to forever **remember** that they had been the poor and the vulnerable – slaves at the mercy of the rich and powerful. Remembering this was vital to their conversion...

As Rick McKinley writes in his book, [Faith For This Moment](#),

"Remember that we all stand poor before God. Every bit of mercy, grace, and new life that we have experienced was unearned and undeserved. We were enslaved to sin and maybe enslaved to money, but we were not without hope, because God is a generous God. We are called to remember that Jesus took on our poverty in full. He gave up all his wealth to become what we are so that he could make us what he is. He became poor

so that he could make us rich. We **remember** that we have received abundant generosity from Jesus and are still in need of it daily." (145)

So, **remember**.

[pause and pray]

And **repent**. Again, to quote Rick McKinley,

"**Repentance means to turn around**. Jesus welcomes us to repent and admit that we have bought into [Egypt's] ways. We admit that the story we have been shaped by has come to an end. We are closing the book on it, and we are opening up a new book with a better story. Repentance is confessing that we are God's children, not citizens of [Egypt], and that we are ready to put his generosity on display."

So, remember, and repent...

[pause and pray]

And lastly, **practice**.

"The best way to ensure that we have repented is to practice generosity... With each act of generosity, we declare that we are following our King, who saved us in our own poverty and set us free to enter into the poverty of others."

This last invitation is the one that most stands out to me today – in the growing conviction that *often the change of heart that we long for and need begins not with our hearts, but with our hands and our feet.* Stepping **toward** the poor and vulnerable in our lives and offering our hands to **serve**...

The Apostle Paul seemed to think this way. Hear his counsel to those who's former way was stealing. **Ephesians 4:28**,

"Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need."

How practical is that?

Don't just sit back and ask God to change your heart.

Put your repentance into practice – through seeking to meet the needs of others...

Receive.

Remember.

Repent

and Practice...

Practice the ways of your rescuing God.

Maybe this is why Jesus' core invitation is always – "**Come, follow Me.**"

Because it's as **we follow Jesus** in the way of His compassion and generosity that we find ourselves set free.

Let me close with one last line from Rick McKinley – a pastor and disciple of Jesus who lives in Portland.

I quote him at length here because just like the rest of us, I need a pastor, and Rick's been a pastor to me through his books for years, but also because I simply need the hope he speaks here.

As I dug into this commandment this week, I remembered that Rick had written about the call of God to generosity and I knew I wanted to hear what he had to say. And one line in particular, convinced me to read the whole chapter.

He writes, "When it comes to our money, we look a whole lot more like Egypt than we do our God. ***But it is never too late to let God set us free from endless wanting and selfish accumulation.***"

It's never too late to let God set us free – that we might be a part of His rescuing grace to others...

Let's pray