

October 27, 2013

The National Presbyterian Church

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS:

Stop, Thief!

Malachi 3:6-8

Dr. David Renwick

Throughout the fall we're following a series of sermons in which we are looking at the Ten Commandments, the Commandments given to us through Moses to the people of Israel by God when the people of Israel had been delivered from slavery in Egypt some 3,000 to 3,500 years ago and were heading on their way to the land that God had promised them. They had had no control over their lives for 400 years, and now they had to live together as a free people. They had to form themselves into a people, into a nation. And God gives them the rules by which they can play the game of "community life" together, effectively, efficiently, justly, giving most glory to God, knowing how best to live. God-given rules and boundaries; the Ten Commandments.

So far we've looked at four of these Commandments.

The first two Commandments focus on God.

- *Where* God is in our lives: *You shall have no other gods before me* – forcing us to ask "what's our first priority?"
- *You shall have no idols* – you must be very careful about the image of God that you have in your mind. How are we to shape in our minds the image of the eternal immortal invisible God? Well, says the scripture, through the one image that God gives to us that is legitimate to bow down before. The New Testament calls Jesus the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). And before him, one day, every knee shall bow in praise (Philippians 2). We reshape our image of God day by day. No gods before me, no idols.

Then we looked at the sixth and the seventh Commandments: *no murder, no adultery*.

- *Murder*, says Jesus, is not just about literally killing somebody else. It's about the anger in our heart (Matthew 5:21-26). It's about our relationships with other people. It's about our passion for reconciliation.
- And *adultery*, says Jesus, is not just about physical adultery in a marriage that has been broken. It is about bringing the whole area of sexuality before God as part of our worship before God (Matthew 5:27-30). The God we worship is the creator of the Earth, of stuff, of matter. The God of the Hebrews is not just a God interested in the spiritual world but in the material world. The resurrection of our Lord Jesus is not merely spiritual but material as well. God is interested not just in our souls but in our bodies.

So these are the Commandments we have considered so far and we come this morning to the eighth Commandment which in the language of the old King James Version says to us "***Thou shalt not steal.***" Thou shalt not steal. No stealing, no theft – a Commandment routinely ignored by millions and millions of people, and from time to time no doubt, even by some of us even here today!!

Think for example of what's going on *in our stores* these days. It's estimated that here in the United States 27 million people shop lift every year. That's about 9% of our population, 27 million people shop lift every year. That's 13 billion dollars' worth of goods stolen in retail business, 35 million dollars every day. 25% of those who do it are kids, 75% are adults but apparently they tend to learn to steal when they're young; it's a habit throughout their lives.

(www.shopliftingprevention.org)

And then there are those who steal not from stores but *from parking lots: car theft!* You may be wondering whether your car is still going to be in our parking lot after the service is over today. Let me tell you some good news. This is one list where Washington D.C. is not at the top! The ten cities where more cars are stolen than any other place are in California or the State of Washington Unfortunately, there's still some bad news! Especially if you're driving a Honda Civic or Accord, you need to know that those are the favorite cars to be stolen. In fact, over 700,000 cars are stolen in our nation every year.

(*25 Most Stolen Newer Vehicles*, Kirk Bell, www.MSN.com).

So there is theft in the parking lot, there's theft in the store, and then there's theft when you go on vacation. Of course, we go *on vacation* to have a good time, but you have to be careful when you go on vacation, especially, according to Rick Steves the PBS travel guru, when you go to Europe this is what he says:

Europe is safe when it comes to violent crime but it's very dangerous in terms of petty theft. Purse snatching and pickpocketing are rampant in places where tourists gather. Thieves target Americans. Not because European thieves are mean says Rick Steves but because they're smart. Americans have all the good stuff in their bags and wallets. Loaded down with valuables he writes, jet lagged and bumbling around in a strange new environment we stick out like jeweled thumbs. If I were a European street thief I'd specialize in Americans. If you're not constantly on guard you'll have something stolen. (<http://www.ricksteves.com/plan/tips/theft.htm>).

So you've had your great vacation and your wallet's been stolen and you've come face-to-face with all of this and you're back home again and you have to pay your taxes and that leads us to *tax evasion* which in our country as in many other countries is a chronic problem. A couple of sources I looked up indicated that some 300 billion dollars every year fails to get reported or collected by the IRS. That's about 40% of the "fiscal hole" that we dig in our country each year. It would change the nature of our national discussion if it could be collected.

(http://www.ourfiscalsecurity.org/storage/infographic_FRI_D5.pdf;
<http://investorplace.com/investorpolitics/10-worst-countries-for-tax-evasion/>)

Of course when it comes to theft it's not just "money" or "things" that are stolen these days. It's also "thoughts" and "ideas" that get stolen as well: *plagiarism, intellectual property*. Professor Raymond Schroth is a professor teaching, he wrote a year ago in a magazine called America he wrote these words

My heart sank. Joe had struck me as one of the better students. The assignment had been to read James Joyce's short story The Dead, watch John Huston's film adaption of it, and then write one page analyzing one scene. But something didn't smell right. I'd already graded a half dozen short essays by Joe, so I knew his style. This was not it. I searched for one suspicious sentence using Google and voila, he had cribbed his report from someone else.

(<http://americamagazine.org/issue/5140/article/plagiarism-plague>).

Plagiarism! Over half our college presidents, according to the Pew Research Center, think that plagiarism is on the rise. Only two percent think it's going down. The rest say it's holding

steady. But that steady level is at an unacceptable place. That's 98% who think the whole thing is out of hand. But plagiarism of course is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to theft of this kind – ideas, patents, music, medicines, electronics, jewelry and the list could go on and on.

(see Tim Goral, *University Business Magazine*, June, 2102)

And then there's the theft which perhaps scares many of us more than these and that's *identity theft* on the rise these days. Social Security numbers, your credit cards, scams of one kind or another. In effect, 11 million Americans every year, especially those who are older, are at risk. Over the past three years the identity theft business had increased by some 60% – so it's a \$21 billion industry in our nation at the moment. Here are two web sites you can look up so that you can protect yourself against some of this:

- “Confessions of a Con Artist,” AARP Magazine, Sept 2012
<http://www.aarp.org/money/scams-fraud/info-09-2012/confessions-of-a-con-artist.html>
- Eight Ways Seniors Can Avoid Identity Theft
<http://www.technewsdaily.com/16379-8-ways-seniors-id-theft.html>

And all of this even before we mention the *stealing of persons – kidnapping, human trafficking*. You may well ask, what human trafficking has to do with ‘theft’? Well, when the Old Testament speaks about stealing, *you shall not steal*, there is no question that included in the understanding of theft in those days was the “stealing of persons.”

Exodus 21:16 (see also 24:7) is best translated as “*Whoever steals a person, whether that person has been sold or is still in possession shall be put to death*” (see Patrick Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 319) When Joseph is sold by his brothers into slavery into Egypt he describes himself as “stolen” (Genesis 40:15). His life was “stolen” from him at that time. The Bible clearly sees this treatment of human beings as an act of theft. And it's going on in our world today. Today, it's estimated that there are over two and a half million people whose lives have been stolen, kidnapped, used for sexual profit, or just for labor profit around the world – two and a half million; the United Nations estimates that 50% of these are children and this type of theft brings in a whopping \$31 billion every year. And not just in countries far away but in the developed nations as well. This is actually not a bad business to be in if you don't want to be caught. It's estimated that only one eighth of one percent of those involved in human trafficking ever get caught.

[http://www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/issues_doc/labour/forced_labour/human_trafficking - the facts - final.pdf](http://www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/issues_doc/labour/forced_labour/human_trafficking_-_the_facts_-_final.pdf)

So this is the picture, broad picture, not the complete picture but a general picture, of theft in our world today. And it may well leave us asking “*Why is this the case? Why is this so pervasive? Why so many people stealing?*”

To which one easy answer that we can give, which contains part of the truth but not all of the truth, is this: *that people steal when they are in need*. People steal when they are poor or when they are in need. According to studies that have been conducted since the 1970s this is certainly part of the truth. <http://www.poverties.org/poverty-and-crime.html>

Not (and this we need to be *very clear* in saying), not that all poor people steal by any stretch of the imagination; not that most thieves are poor (I don't know whether they are or not). But that *when* you are poor and in need, the temptation to meet your need by taking what is officially not yours can obviously be very strong. According to retired Princeton Seminary Professor Patrick Miller (*Ten Commandments*, p. 337ff), the Bible recognizes this, and in many ways is expounding the commandment on theft, in its repeated admonitions to care for the poor, for the

widows, for the orphans and for the aliens (who are our immigrants today: “alien” is just another word for “immigrant”).

So for example when we turn to Deuteronomy 24 we read,

“You shall not withhold the wages of the poor and needy laborers whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land, in one of your towns, you shall pay them their wages daily before sunset because they are poor and their livelihood, [their ability to live!] depends on them. Otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you and you would incur guilt.”

How would you incur guilt? By holding back those wages which make it more likely that they will have to find (steal!) the food that they need to eat in some way which is not legitimate. That at least is part of this. Or you might be guilty yourself in holding back wages of breaking this eighth Commandment! Deuteronomy 24 goes on in Verse 19 to say this:

“when you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field you shall not go back to get it. It shall be left for the alien, the orphan and the widow so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees do not strip what is left. When you gather the grapes from your vineyard do not glean what is left. It shall be for the alien, the orphan and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt therefore I am commanding you to do this.”

In other words, since you’ve been down at the bottom before, physically or spiritually, and God had to step down to lift you up, to give you power to follow him in a way that you would never have had without his help, then you must do the same to others. This is God’s word through Moses to the people of Israel, and through them to us. We care for the poor not only because they need to be cared for; we care for the poor not only because God cares for us when we are poor in spirit, but we care for the poor because we are our brother’s keeper and we need to give to others the same fighting chance that we expect of having enough so we do not have to transgress into the property of others in order merely to stay alive and make ends meet.

Indeed this whole approach to the commandment within the Bible itself is a demonstration that the commandment not to steal is not just about ‘not stealing’ but about caring for others – indeed, about giving to others, sharing with others. And this is not only the Bible’s own understanding, but how our heritage as Presbyterians has understood the commandment throughout the generations.

This happens to be Reformation Sunday – a day in which we emphasize perhaps a little more than usual our Presbyterian heritage. I want us to turn to a couple of our doctrinal statements from 400 and 500 years ago, and also to focus on the teaching of a man called John Calvin, one of our great theologians in the 15th century, to see how they understood this particular Commandment within this kind of a context. You’ll find the quotes to begin with at least once again on the insert of your Bulletin. First of all from the Heidelberg Catechism (which comprises a whole series of questions and answers to understand and explain the Christian faith).

Question 111 is this: ***What does God require of you in this 8th Commandment, not to steal?*** And the answer: *That I work for the good of my neighbor. Not just that I don’t steal but that I positively work for the good of my neighbor wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would have others deal with me, and do my work well so that I may be able to help the poor in their need. So that I may be able to help the poor in their need. Not only by handing out to those in need but remember this is the beginning of the Protestant work ethic, to create an economy in which there is opportunity for all so that there is less and less need.*

Then, the Westminster shorter catechism, written a hundred years later in the 1600s:

Question 75 ***What is forbidden in the 8th Commandment?***

Answer: *The 8th Commandment forbids whatsoever does or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbor's wealth or outward estate.*

You know the word “commonwealth” that the Puritans brought with them to this land? This idea, says the Westminster Shorter Catechism, means that part of our responsibility as Christian citizens is to care not only for ourselves but for the “common wealth of our neighbor” as well. In other words, if poverty is one of the key reasons for breaking the 8th Commandment then one way to keep it is to work hard ourselves – the Protestant work ethic – but not only for ourselves but to provide employment for others for the “common wealth”, for the community that God longs to establish.

Though of course having said that, neither the Reformers 450 years ago, nor the writers of the Bible two, three thousand years ago were naïve. *They were fully aware that the biggest factor in theft is not poverty (poverty may be part of it but not the major part): not poverty but simple greed, that affects all of us, rich and poor alike.* **Greed:** The insatiable appetite for more and more without any boundary. And this greed affects people of all stages in all places, rich and poor alike.

Indeed, once again looking back: In July 1555 in Geneva, Switzerland, John Calvin preached on this 8th Commandment, and what's interesting to note in his sermon is that he focused his attention not on petty theft by the poor but on *fraud and corruption in the world of business and law by the rich and the powerful!* And in many ways his words from 500 years ago seem right up to date. This is what he says:

“There is no one single form of stealing. For some steal by pilfering the goods of others as when we say he stole a horse or he stole so much money. And indeed such thefts are adequately sentenced by the world. . . when a merchant overcharges for his merchandise or when he sells it in an underhanded way knowing that no one will be able to catch him, thinking to himself ‘ah, here’s a simple man who knows nothing, I will trap him,’ – that is theft. . . God will not neglect to judge as a thief anyone who has taken advantage of a simple man or has sold him goods in an underhanded way. Moreover if an artisan and a manufacturer makes a faulty good and the buyer cannot perceive the flaw, it’s all the same.”

And then he moves on to speak about the abusive justice and the confusion that people have between what is legal and what is right. Something may be legal but it may not necessarily be right in the sight of God. So Calvin says,

whoever receives another's property through the courts thinks that he is the world's most just owner, but in truth, there are some who make justice a pure act of brigandry and who through unjust practices reverse all equity and law, for often justice is only a marketplace where another's rights are sold and all justice is perverted. But even where that is not the case, if through astuteness and finesse a man finds a means of acquiring for himself another man's goods and argues ‘Oh the courts judged in my favor over that, it's mine,’ – there, too, may still be a thief. (John Calvin's Sermons on the Ten Commandments, p. 186ff, Benjamin W. Farley, Ed./Trans, Baker, 1980).

So greed and deceit and manipulation by the use of power, the use and abuse of power and not caring for the gullible, all of these are involved, says our heritage, within this Commandment.

Which leaves me believing that if John Calvin were alive in the last four or five years, he would have said that all of this applies to the events and attitudes leading to the great recession. He would have said that the loss almost overnight of somewhere around 16 trillion dollars in private wealth from everyday citizens like you and me, occurred because some specific greedy people along with a greedy society, as a whole, had long forgotten the 8th Commandment, “*Thou shalt not steal!*” – not just in its literal application but in its broader application: forgetting and ignoring that God holds us accountable not only for ‘not stealing’ but for positively caring for the poor and for the community, for its wellbeing as a whole; for using our skills, our professional skills with integrity for ourselves – but not for ourselves only, but for others, so that with all our heart and might and soul we resist the temptation to see consumption as an end in itself: self being consumed by the limitlessness of greed.

In fact when it comes to resisting greed, when it comes to opening our lives up to others, the scriptures provide one constant remedy: ***and that is the habitual practice and that’s what it takes, not merely a thought, but the habitual practice, of generosity.*** Not *grabbing* or *getting* but *giving* as a *habitual* practice.

Listen again to those words in the Old Testament in which this Commandment is expounded and expanded. “*When you reap the harvest of your land you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest.* (Leviticus 19:19). You will not milk it for all it’s worth! If you’re a farmer, you will leave the perimeter for others even though it’s there for the taking you don’t do it. You leave it for others. You practice generosity.

Now I suspect that not many if any of us here today are farmers so we deal in cash. Well, think of our cash as if it were a field, and what God says to us is this: ***that we are not to use it to the full extreme. We are not to max out our credit! We are to keep a boundary and we are to set it aside for God and for others that we might do God’s work here on Earth.***

This is why Malachi at the end of the Old Testament speaks of our giving, our tithing, of returning a portion of what we have to God in terms of the 8th Commandment: *you shall not steal*. Says Malachi (3:9-10)

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me.

But you say “*How are we robbing you?*” (surely we’re not thieves?!)

Says Malachi speaking for God: “*In your tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse for you are robbing me the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house and thus put me to the test says the Lord of Hosts and see if I will not open the window of Heaven for you and pour down for you and overflowing blessing.*”

Leave the perimeter for me, says God, and trust me with what you give.

I want to leave you this morning with a story which I think exemplifies this perhaps better than any other story I know and certainly describes for me, and I hope for you, the kind of life that I want to live and that I trust you want to live as well: Not “a grabbing life” but “a giving life.” The story is told by a woman called Ethel Blackledge and it’s about her childhood in the

1930s in Southwestern Ohio in the days of the great depression, not the *great recession* but the *great depression*, in a time of summer drought. No rain, no water, she writes this:

At first the only source of water we had was a tank called a cistern in which we caught rainwater. Our next door neighbors the Lawsons offered us water from their well when we needed it, and my parents eventually saved enough money to have our own well dug. Soon after that a terrible drought hit the Midwest and wells began to dry up. Water could have been trucked in but the great depression had hit the nation and people had no money. They depended on nature. The lack of rain continued and soon the Lawsons' well went dry. They asked if we could spare enough water for their use and mother replied without hesitation, "God gave us the water, take what you need." Then the Perkins who lived across the street came over and said their well too was dry. Mother gave them the same answer. As days went by with no rain other neighbors came too, all pumping water from our well. Mr. Paige, a neighbor whose well still supplied water asked mother, "Aren't you scared, letting all those people help themselves to your water? Your well will run dry." Again mother gave the same answer: "God gave us the water, we will share it."

A few days later Mrs. Gaines, a widow with five children who lived near the Paige's sent her young son up with an empty bucket: "Momma said you might be kind enough to spare some water from your well," he said shyly. "We used to get water from Mr. Paige's well but he says we can't have any more." Mother replied, "Go to the well, fill your bucket, God is still giving us water." Day after day the hot sun burned down scorching fields around as creeks had long ago dried up the water disappearing.

I remember the day when Mr. Paige with an empty bucket on his arm knocked at our door: "I know that I refused water to my neighbor," he said, "and now our well has gone dry like the rest. If you could . . ." and mother did not even let him finish the sentence! She said, "God gave us the water. Take what you need."

As a result, the Paige's became the seventh family, many of them with small children who now carried water from our lone well. Throughout the dry hot days of that summer we furnished water to 50 people and our well never went dry.

That is keeping the 8th Commandment: "*You shall not steal.*" Literally true – **Don't steal**. But on the flip side – **Be generous**: give, trusting in the one who gives to us, who stoops down to us in our need and provides for us enough, and more than enough, for ourselves and for others and for the world, for the "common wealth" that God longs to create as a reflection of his kingdom, in which all of us, in every way, are rich. ***Though shalt not steal!***

PRESBYTERIAN DOCUMENTS

HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Q. 110. What does God forbid in the eighth commandment?

A. *He forbids not only the theft and robbery which civil authorities punish, but God also labels as theft all wicked tricks and schemes by which we seek to get for ourselves our neighbor's goods, whether by force or under the pretext of right, such as false weights and measures, deceptive advertising or merchandising, counterfeit money, exorbitant interest, or any other means forbidden by God.*

He also forbids all greed and misuse and waste of his gifts.

Q. 111. But what does God require of you in this commandment?

*A. That I work for the good of my neighbor wherever I can and may,
deal with him as I would have others deal with me,
and do my work well so that I may be able to help the poor in their need.*

WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM

Q. 74, 75. *The eighth commandment requireth the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.*

The eighth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever doth, or may, unjustly hinder our own, or our neighbor's, wealth or outward estate .

SCRIPTURE

DELIBERATE DECEIT

Genesis 27 Jacob steals Esau's birthright;

Deuteronomy 19:14

14 You must not move your neighbor's boundary marker, set up by former generations, on the property that will be allotted to you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess.

ABUSING POWER FOR GAIN

1 Kings 21:1-16

¹Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. ²And Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house;" ³But Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance."

¹⁶As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

Isaiah 10:1-3

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, ²to turn aside the needy from justice and *to rob the poor of my people of their right*, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!

³What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth?

Proverbs 22:16, 22

¹⁶Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss. ²²Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate;

CARING FOR THE GENERAL WELFARE OF ANOTHER

Deuteronomy 22: 1-3, 14-17

¹You shall not watch your neighbor's ox or sheep straying away and ignore them; you shall take them back to their owner.

²If the owner does not reside near you or you do not know who the owner is, you shall bring it to your own house, and it shall remain with you until the owner claims it; then you shall return it. ³You shall do the same with a neighbor's donkey; you shall do the same with a neighbor's garment; and you shall do the same with anything else that your neighbor loses and you find. You may not withhold your help. ⁴You shall not see your neighbor's donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; you shall help to lift it up.

BEING GENEROUS TO THE POOR AND TO GOD

Deuteronomy 24:14-22

¹⁴You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. ¹⁵You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

¹⁸***Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.***

¹⁹When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings.

²⁰When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

²¹When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ***22Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.***

Malachi 3:8-10

⁸Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me!

But you say, “How are we robbing you?” In your tithes and offerings!

⁹You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you!

¹⁰Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

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