

**Sermon preached by Mr. Michael Bittenbender
at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 10, 2019**

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (8)

Exodus 20:14

Well here we are, progressing right along with these 10 commandments. After this morning, we will only have 2 more left. I believe my goal of getting through these in less than 2 years may just happen.

This morning's reading from God word comes to us from the book of Exodus, Chapter 20 verse 15 which can be found on page 54.

My beloved sister, who is here this morning, called me this week and wanted to share that she thought for this commandment, I should read the passage, and say "Just don't do it" and call it a morning. This almost sounded intriguing, wondering what would people think. Then Neil reminded me of something. Now I want to be very clear so as to not steal the credit for this. Neil reminded me that there are instances where stealing is ok. Slightly puzzled I did my signature expression where I try to both affirm and question what someone has said, prompting them to reveal their secret and yet being able to affirm that, of course I knew that. Neil pointed out that you are allowed to steal a base in baseball. You're allowed to intercept and steal the ball from the other team in football, and you're allowed to steal the ball in basketball and it is even a tracked statistic. Perhaps, this commandment needs a closer look to see just how does this apply to our lives.

This morning, I'm talking to the thieves and robbers in the room. If you're not one of those people, feel free to tune out. If you're wondering though, what might put you in that category, let's take a look at the Heidelberg catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism is a Protestant confessional document taking the form of a series of questions and answers for use in teaching Reformed Christian doctrine. It was written in 1563 in Heidelberg. Kevin DeYoung in his Book on the 10 Commandments opens his chapter on the 8th commandment by quoting from this catechism.

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

A. He forbids not only outright theft and robbery, punishable by law. But in God's sight theft also includes cheating and swindling our neighbor by schemes made to appear legitimate, such as: inaccurate measurements of weight, size, or volume; fraudulent merchandising; counterfeit money; excessive interest; or any other means forbidden by God. In addition he forbids all greed and pointless squandering of his gifts.

Let me also bring up the dictionary definitions for stealing: theft, robbery, burglary, larceny, shoplifting, plunder, holdup, plagiarism, fraud, embezzlement, blackmail, graft, misappropriation, loot, piracy, to pilfer, sneak, swindle, swipe, the list goes on!

Graham Smith elaborated on stealing by looking at Proverbs 10:2 which states “Ill-gotten treasures have no lasting value, but righteousness delivers from death.” He says “there are ways to prosper the wrong way and to prosper the right way. He mentions 4 ways to prosper the wrong way; prospering through dishonesty, defrauding, defaulting, and depending on luck.”

***Has anyone ever thought about the origins of the phrase perhaps after bargaining with someone, “man I got a steal on that”. ***

Stealing can also be more than taking a physical possession from someone. It can be more than just taking, shoplifting, burglary, stealing answers from a fellow student. People can and do steal time from their work when they come in late and don’t report it, or take some extra time during lunch. People can and do steal people’s sense of comfort or security, people can steal someone’s innocence.

People can also steal talents and gifts. Each one of us here this morning have God given gifts and abilities. When we don’t return them to the Lord, when we don’t use our gifts for His purposes or for His kingdom, we are stealing. What gift do you have, whether natural ability or spiritual gift that you could be using in this church for His glory?

This turns out to be pretty inclusive or all-encompassing for many. The eighth commandment however is not simply about stealing. The troubling thing about stealing, in many of these senses, speak of our trust in God. Ron Mehl says, “The truth is, every time we steal something — whether large or small — we are saying, ‘I will be my own provider in this instance. If I don’t take it now, I will be the loser.’ But the Lord wants us to understand that when we place our trust fully in Him, we are never the loser. Through this commandment, the Lord wanted to say to the people of Israel — and to us as well — Let me provide for you. I want you to trust Me, rest in Me, and be contented with Me.”

Robert Morris added that “Stealing is a bold statement to God that you don’t trust him”.

The reason people steal is because they’ve forgotten about God. The reason people deceive, manipulate, and cut ethical corners is because they believe their future lies in their own hands. When people forget who God is, they end up being very possessive and greedy. Rather than trusting God with the blessings they have, they begin to hoard and protect and guard those things”. This possessiveness, this protecting and guarding leads to greed and leads to a false understanding of where our treasures need to be stored. When we put our trust in earthly things, things which fade, that which moths and rust destroy, and those things disappear or fail us, it leaves us in a bind. We realize oh no, I need to do something because I no longer have (blank). This uneasiness causes us to continue storing up, guarding and unwilling to give them up.

So what should we do?

There is in fact a follow-up question in the Heidelberg Catechism. The next questions states:

Q111: What does God require of you in this commandment?

A: That I do whatever I can for my neighbor's good, that I treat others as I would like them to treat me, and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need.

One cannot just read the 8th commandment and think that as long as I have never stolen I have not broken this commandment. Paul in Ephesians chapter 4 verse 28 writes, "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." The 8th commandment requires more than just not stealing. Remember that these last commandments, the bottom 6, help us understand relationship with others better. We can love our neighbors by respecting their things. We can have a better relationship with everyone around us when we are not stealing from them. When we work hard, the need for stealing diminishes. With work comes opportunity and so as Robert Morris points out, "stop stealing, start working, and get giving."

There is this sense about this commandment that requires us to be generous with what we have. We need to treat others like we want to be treated. Jesus commands us to "do unto others as we would have them do to you", adding that this sums up the law and the prophets. Jesus is saying, in the law, you find this idea that we should treat others like we want to be treated. Rather than guard and protect our possession, we should be working hard that we may be generous with what we have. DeYoung again in his book states: "It means thinking of others as we would want to be thought of: 'I want laws, virtues and practices that protect and promote my neighbor's well-being.' and I want to work hard so that I may be able to help my neighbor when he is not doing well." We have this dual sense of refraining from stealing and to have a spirit of generosity.

Matthew 6:21 says "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also". Is your treasure in your things, in your possessions? Is your treasure in your bank account, hoarding it? Is your treasure in your job, or perhaps your family? If your treasure is your gifting, something you are great at, and that isn't being used for the Lord. If you aren't building up treasures in heaven, you are violating this eighth commandment. If you are so worried about things on this earth that it causes inaction regarding the needs of your neighbor, you are violating this eighth commandment. If you are building up treasures in heaven, trusting in the Lord, doing his will for you and your abilities, loving your neighbor, then congratulations. And if this becomes overwhelming for you, if all of a sudden, through self-reflection you begin to feel the weight of the world on you, there is good news.

In Luke chapter 23, Jesus is crucified. On either side of Him are criminals, often thought to be robbers and thieves. One mocks Jesus, the other rebukes his fellow criminal, pointing out that they were being punished justly for their actions, yet this man has done nothing wrong. Then he pleads for Jesus to remember him in the Kingdom of God. Jesus responds by telling him, "Truly, truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." The thief knew who Jesus was. The thief, at the end of his life, knowing this, trusted in what Jesus

claimed and asked to be remembered. The thief received salvation. A robber, a thief, is with Jesus in heaven.

I heard a story about a son whose father collected silver dollars. Whenever the dad went to the bank he would buy silver dollars if they had them and keep them in a piggy bank at home. Well the son began taking 1 or 2 if he needed to buy something. As he entered his teenage years he began to take a few more than 1 or 2. Time passed, the son grew up, got married and after his wedding he became a Christian. He became convicted of his stealing from his father and he calculated that he did not steal more than \$100 worth of silver dollars. He read in Exodus 22 about restitution and came up with a plan that since he stole, he needed to repay 4- or 5-fold. The next time he sees his father he writes him a check for \$500 and confesses to his stealing as a child. His father says, "I don't want your money, don't write that check." The son insists and the father refuses. Finally the son asks why not and the father responds, "Because I already forgave you." The son questioningly asks, "You knew?" The father says, "Of course I knew, I bought silver dollars every week and my piggy bank was getting lighter, I'm no dummy." The son asks, "Why didn't you confront me?" The father answers, "Because I wanted you to repent."

May we all repent from our stealing, stealing in every sense of the word. May we all repent from our selfish ambitions with our material possessions when we are not looking out for our neighbor. I stand before you, a miserable offender of this commandment. I am in need of putting my trust not in my earthly things, my possession or my abilities, but in God. May we repent, and put our trust in God, that He is our provider, that His grace is sufficient, and that He is preparing a place, far better than anything here on earth, for us in His kingdom. May we seek to love our neighbors by not stealing but also to use out of our abundance to help them in their time of need.