

“Aseret ha-Debrot: The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation”

Part Eight: The Eighth Spiritual Principle ~ “You shall not steal”

The Law of Sharing

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Exodus 20:15 (NRSV) ~ “You shall not steal.”



There once was a five-year-old girl, who went into a store and stole a 25-cent toy. When her parents discovered that she had done it, they made her take it back and apologize. She was worried that she might be thrown in jail but she went anyway, knees knocking, and voice wavering and said “I’m sorry. I stole this from your store and want to give it back to you. I promise I’ll never steal from a store again.” They did not throw her in jail and she never shoplifted again. I know. Because it was me.

A few of my friends shoplifted when they were in middle school. It was a casual sport, done just for fun. Not because they needed anything. I spent those years in a middle class neighborhood outside Toronto and, believe me, my friends had plenty to wear, plenty to eat, nice summer cottages, pretty much anything they wanted. But as I said, shoplifting was kind of a thrill-seeking sport. One of my friends, Peggy, was really pretty ingenious. Her parents gave her money to buy a new pair of jeans. This being the days before Aberkrombie and Fitch or American Eagle, off she went to K-Mart and bought a pair of jeans and saved the receipt. The next day she went back to K-Mart and stole another pair of identical jeans. On the third day she returned the original pair she had bought with the receipt, pocketing the money.

The following little story by Wayne Dosick in his book *Golden Rules* summarizes my feelings about what my friend Peggy did:

“A young man knocked on the door of a woman’s house and asked her if she would like to buy some of the delicious strawberries he had just picked from his father’s fields.

‘Yes,’ said the woman. ‘I would very much like to buy your fresh berries. I’ll just take your basket inside the house and measure out two quarts.’

The boy stood on the porch and began to play with the woman’s dog. ‘Wouldn’t you like to come in and see that I measure the strawberries correctly?’ asked the woman. ‘How do you know that I won’t cheat you, and take more than two quarts? How do you know I won’t steal.’

The young man replied, ‘I am not afraid, for you would get the worst of the deal.’

‘Get the worst of the deal?’ the woman said. ‘How could that be? What do you mean by that?’

And the young man said, ‘Why ma’am, if you take more than the two quarts of strawberries that you are paying me for, I would only lose the berries. You would make yourself a liar and a thief.’ (Wayne Dosick, *Golden Rules: 10 Ethical Values Parents Need to Teach Their Children*, pp. 57-58)

My friend Peggy might have had an ingenious shoplifting plan. She got both a pair of jeans and money as well out of it. Her parents never found out, but I lost a lot of respect for her. So often we think that the eighth commandment “You shall not steal” is about petty theft like shoplifting or pickpocketing. That is how I understand it when I was a child: you should not go into a store and steal a 25-cent plastic toy. That is how I understood it when I was a middle schooler: you should not shoplift.

My big awakening into a larger meaning of this commandment came when I was 20 years old and took a mission field assignment in Jamaica. I’m not sure whether you know that as an undergraduate I double majored in public health and religious studies. My dream was to be a missionary. I felt it wasn’t enough to just preach the Gospel. I needed to have a practical skill to use as well. God doesn’t just want us to heal people’s souls but their bodies as well. So within public health I specialized in maternal and child nutrition. The reason that I was sent to Jamaica was to help counter the devastating effects that the Nestles milk company was having on the babies of Jamaica, a number of whom were suffering from severe malnutrition. This is what happened: representatives from the Nestles milk company went to Jamaica, as well as a number of third world countries around the world. They went to hospitals and, as soon as a mother had given birth to a baby, they would enter the hospital room and give her a gift bag that contained formula. They would then go on to convince the mother that it was the modern and sophisticated thing to do to give formula to her baby rather than to nurse her baby. Formula, the Nestles milk company representatives argued, was far superior to breast milk, and how much easier it was, they convinced the mothers, to give a bottle rather than a breast.

Unfortunately, many of the mothers in Jamaica and all over the world bought into and still buy into this sales pitch. Instead of nursing their babies they started giving their babies formula from bottles, right there in the hospital. Within a week their own milk had dried up and they took their babies back to their homes with cans of powdered formula in hand. What happened next in many cases, especially in the small villages, was that they mixed the formula with contaminated water, leading to diarrhea and dehydration and sometimes the death of their infants. In addition, the initial formula that they received was a free gift. They found when they got home that they did not have enough money to continue buying the formula so, even if they had good drinking water, they began putting in reduced amounts of the powdered formula to help it go further, leading to malnutrition in the babies. My job was to undo this damage by reeducating the mothers in the hospitals to nurse their babies.

Nestles milk company: You shall not steal! Through deceit they had stolen the health and futures of many of the children of Jamaica and other places around the world. All for corporate greed to fill the pockets of a select few!

The eighth commandment takes on brand new meaning in the modern world of globalization. How many of you know people who were impacted by the world of the Bernie Maddoffs, corporations doing away with the pension funds of working people who saved all their lives working hard until retirement age only to discover years later that their funds had been looted by the very people who do not need pension money at all?

How about the phenomenon of “identity theft”? For me that’s included not only having my identity stolen recently when someone created an Instagram account using my profile picture and adding my friends to it but also, in 2008, someone from Georgia actually stole my identity that included not just financial records but medical files as well. It took months and months of hard work and more than a few grey hairs along the way to get it straightened out. How many of you have been stolen from in that way? It feels like quite a violation, doesn’t it? I remember too how violated I and others felt a few years ago when our accountant’s computer was hacked into, leading us to have to close down our bank accounts and open new ones.

A few years ago someone successfully scammed my mother, who wired someone pretending to be my son-in-law money that could not be traced. This too is widespread!

How about people stealing our credit or debit card information and making purchases using them? There are very few of us who have not had these fraudulent charges.

I know that one of the major concerns our government has right now is the Chinese stealing our intellectual property.

People take people’s ideas and pass them off as their own, in an act that often is called “stealing the credit.” People also plagiarize and copy other’s music and films. That’s why there are now lawyers (especially in music city Nashville) who specialize in copyright law.

We now live in a world where elections are stolen. I know many of us are worried about that right now with our own election being just a month away. How about government officials who pad their pockets while their citizens go hungry?

Yes, this eighth spiritual principle for sacred living has a much broader application than it did when it was given by God through Moses some 3,500 years ago when it applied to the theft of livestock or their wives or daughters. Yet across time and space God's voice speaks out to us today as it did to Moses: "You shall not steal." Even though my baseball loving husband would say that there is at least one good form of stealing and that is when the Yankees steal home plate, that's perhaps the only good kind of stealing we can think of.

I wonder, for example, what the Christian response should be to this information released last year from Vox, when they wrote:

"After years of kicking and screaming, **corporate executives** have finally released pay data on what their **CEO** makes **versus** their median **worker**. Unsurprisingly, the gap is obscene. ... America's CEOs earned a staggering \$14.5 million in 2018, on average, **compared to** the average \$39,888 that rank-and-file **workers** made. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/6/26/18744304/ceo-pay-ratio-disclosure-2018>

The **United States** topped the list in 2018 for the country with the highest gap between CEO and worker pay. I wonder what the figures are in 2020?

What do we think about corporations such as Amazon not paying any taxes, or extremely wealthy individuals paying only \$750 in taxes a year, while a single worker who makes \$40,000 a year may only have \$28,352 of spendable income after taxes with which to pay all expenses? To what extent is this a form of stealing?

I wonder what Jesus might say about these statistics? Matthew 19 gives us a pretty clear answer:

"Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?'"

'Why do you ask me about what is good?' Jesus replied. 'There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.'

'Which ones?' the man inquired.

Jesus replied, 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.'

'All these I have kept,' the young man said. 'What do I still lack?'

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' (Matt. 19:16-23)

The problem, of course, is not wealth or property per se but it is our greedy idolizing of it.

Today, even though we might default into thinking about crime in poor intercity neighborhoods, we are learning that much stealing is the sin of rich people, powerful people. But somehow, because it is done through wheeling and dealing behind closed doors, it takes on a certain respectability and no one questions it. As Friedrich Schiller put it back in the 19th century: "It is criminal to steal a purse. It is daring to steal a fortune. It is a mark of greatness to steal a crown. The blame diminishes as the guilt increases." (cited Joan Chittister, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 94) Of course, we call this "white collar crime."

But stealing is not just about things and money. My view is that the worst form of stealing is against **people and relationships**. Some describe the eighth commandment as a warning against "stealing someone's freedom" through kidnapping and selling people into slavery. In our Judaeo-Christian tradition where we assert that human beings are created in the very image of God, when we take people as slaves we are stealing something of God, aren't we? We know that our own country's economy was built on the backs of the hard labor of slaves stolen in Africa and brought in shackles to our shores. The repercussions have lingered. Human trafficking continues even today.

How often do we consider that the very land that we live on was stolen from its Native American inhabitants?

In modern times examples of stealing can also include stealing another person's health and wellbeing and even their very lives. What do we think about people who text while driving or drive under the influence? How about those who put their belief in their right to personal liberty over wearing a mask while out in public, putting others at risk for possibly becoming infected with Covid-19? This became so much more real to me a few weeks ago when my beloved sister-in-law Eileen died with Covid.

We might ask ourselves why people in Louisville are protesting right now. Is it not because a young Black woman's life was stolen from her when police broke into her apartment and shot her? Her name was Breonna Taylor. Is not the Black Lives Matter movement primarily a cry that we no longer can allow the unjust stealing of black lives through police brutality and marginalization? Perhaps we might imagine the protestors not shouting out "Black Lives Matter" but "You shall not steal"! For is that not what is going on?

How about our planet and the refusal of some to believe the scientific warnings about the human impact on climate change and our unwillingness to make the necessary changes to save our planet? Are we not stealing what is not rightfully ours from future generations?

Across time and space God's voice thunders out to us today as it did to Moses so many years ago, warning us: "You shall not steal."

How about stealing another's integrity through disrespectful behavior? Being rude, demeaning, treating another as less than? How about gossiping about others and thereby stealing their reputation in the eyes of others? This will be addressed in next week's message when we explore the 9th spiritual principle: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex 20:16).

How about our modern cancel culture where, if someone is not spouting the accepted woke agenda, you are simply vanquished, blocked, exiled as though you never existed? When you cancel someone are you not stealing their voice from them on earth. I am among those who agree that this has gone way too far on both sides of the divide. Indeed, a close friend of mine recently said to me that "the left are eating their own."

Finally, there is another kind of stealing in relationships. Think for a moment about the phrase "stealing the limelight." Does the commandment "You shall not steal" have any bearing on the following scenario I read on an internet blog?

“At a recent dinner event, I’m watching interaction take place at a table directly across from me. Three men and two women are talking about business and their common friends. I notice one of the men, Will, is a good storyteller. He captures everyone’s interest and keeps it with a very amusing story. Everyone laughs at the finale; then one of the women brings up her daughter who is applying to Brown University. Will immediately chimes in, “Great institution, you guys remember Jane? Her son got a full ride. Jack, what was her son’s name?” Will continues with an admittedly interesting story about Jane’s son. The woman who initiated the conversation never brings up her daughter again. This pattern continues for a while until Will excuses himself. Then, I watch for reaction. One woman mouths to the group “I’m sorry.”

Can you relate to this? Have you spent time with “Will” before? I’m not sure what the dynamics were there, but I am confident that nobody was happy with Will’s monopolizing of the conversation. Chances are that Will would be embarrassed if he understood the reaction he created. He appeared to be a friendly and intelligent person. The blog goes on to state that: If 100 people are reading this blog, about 20 of you are unknowingly the Will in your group. (story circulating on the internet)

“You shall not steal.” That not only relates to the stealing of property, another’s life, and integrity. It also relates to the stealing of “airtime” in conversation. Let’s all take the challenge this week of examining this eighth spiritual principle not only in terms of property being stolen but also by asking ourselves how we relate to, talk about, and converse with others. Do we need to be the center of attention, in the limelight? Do we cut off or interrupt people when they are talking? Are we impatient? In groups do we take up more than our share of time? Are we stealing the show? And if we are, why do we behave this way? And even more to the point, since the opposite of stealing is sharing, I ask you to do a radical self-inventory and ask yourself how much are you giving to the world? What does the balance sheet look like between what you take and what you give, remembering that in the bigger picture nothing, not even your own life, is actually yours but all things belong to God!

Closing Prayer: God you have given us this eighth spiritual principle to help us both as individuals, as communities, as nations, and as a planet. Help us remember that the reverse of the commandment not to steal is the commandment to share. May we be generous in how we live so that all we say and do may be a blessing to and strengthen not only the lives of those around us but our planet as well. In the precious name of Jesus we offer up this prayer. Amen.