

Psalm 119:129-144

- 129 Your decrees are wonderful;  
therefore my soul keeps them.
- 130 The unfolding of your words gives light;  
it imparts understanding to the simple.
- 131 With open mouth I pant,  
because I long for your commandments.
- 132 Turn to me and be gracious to me,  
as is your custom towards those who love your name.
- 133 Keep my steps steady according to your promise,  
and never let iniquity have dominion over me.
- 134 Redeem me from human oppression,  
that I may keep your precepts.
- 135 Make your face shine upon your servant,  
and teach me your statutes.
- 136 My eyes shed streams of tears  
because your law is not kept.
- 137 You are righteous, O Lord,  
and your judgements are right.
- 138 You have appointed your decrees in righteousness  
and in all faithfulness.
- 139 My zeal consumes me  
because my foes forget your words.
- 140 Your promise is well tried,  
and your servant loves it.
- 141 I am small and despised,  
yet I do not forget your precepts.
- 142 Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness,  
and your law is the truth.
- 143 Trouble and anguish have come upon me,  
but your commandments are my delight.
- 144 Your decrees are righteous for ever;  
give me understanding that I may live.

Exodus 20:15

You shall not steal.

Sermon

You Shall not Steal. This is one of the commandments I just don't think about all that often. In fact, stealing is a commandment that may not feel all too relevant to your daily life. As far as commandments go, you shall not steal seems to be the most self evident of the bunch. It's the single commandment which gets the shortest explanation in any commentary. Stealing seems to be a crime we don't deal with all too often. Cat burglary isn't on my list of hobbies. It's the commandment I'm most likely to forget, because it seems self evident to me, too tied up with not coveting to be truly unique, and also not as big of a deal as murder or adultery.

I think about stealing pretty much only when I see it in movies. I enjoy a good Ocean's 11, Entrapment, or other museum heist film as much as the next person. In fact, it's one of my favorite genres. I just read not one, but two books with an antiquities theft at the center of the plot. There's something campy and amusing about seeing how mastermind criminals get away with stealing the most valuable treasures in the world from the most intensely guarded museums in the world's great cities. I enjoy stealing when Hollywood puts it together in a nice, shiny package for my enjoyment.

As I considered stealing this week, I was actually surprised by the vast number of scenarios and examples I could come up with when I tried. Everything from Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, who once stole silver from a priest, and when he was caught the priest gave him the candlesticks as well, along with the hope that he would use the money to start for himself a better life. Which, spoiler alert, he does. I thought about common political rhetoric on both sides of the spectrum: the common idea from the right that immigrants are “stealing” jobs from hardworking Americans, and from the left, where it’s not unsurprising to hear terms like “looting” and “theft” tossed around when discussing corporations and high net worth individuals moving their funds offshore in order to avoid paying their “fair share” of taxes, whatever that means. I even stopped into a gas station a few days ago, and as I bought a diet coke struck up a conversation with the clerk, who told me they had been held up the night before at gunpoint. I took an extra moment there to check in, to ask after each staff person, because that’s terrifying. To be held up at gunpoint in a robbery and show up to sell me a diet coke the next day.

What I was surprised by as I considered stealing is how flexible my feelings really are on this subject. For me, I found, the ethics and morality of “stealing” depended heartily on context. Jean Valjean is

sympathetic as a character largely because the priest extends him mercy, and in that we come to see his act of stealing as one perhaps even ordained by God, that he would go on to become a wealthy man who in turn saves others. Or Robin Hood, stealing from the rich is laudable in his tale, because the rich have gotten their gain off the taxation of the poor, and he's not so much stealing as setting things to rights. But holding a gas station employee at gunpoint? In nearly all cases we see that as terrifying, and not morally ambiguous. Context matters for this particular crime. So, why then a commandment about it? Is God terribly concerned with property ownership, of shoplifting, or art theft? You'll probably guess that the answer is, well, not really, and if you've been listening at all over the past few weeks, you probably know where I'm going next.

This isn't a commandment about our stuff, it's a commandment about neighbors, and our relationship to and with them. Like all the other commandments, of course. These last three commandments will mark another shift in our thinking. The first four really focused on our relationship to and with God, and the other six are about our relationships with one another. The first three of those dealt with our closest neighbors, our parents, our elders, our spouses and families. Those who are nearest to our own hearts. These last three commandments-not to steal, lie, or be covetous-draw the circle a

little wider still. These commandments are concerned with our social relationships, and I might venture to say our societies at large, how we function as a big, connected group of strangers.

Stealing is a crime very often born of fear. This is why it's a morally ambiguous crime in so many movies and books. If we can see the fear as legitimate, then the crime is less heinous than someone doing the same thing with no reason other than spite. To put it more directly, stealing bread because you fear starvation is acceptable. Stealing money from your employer because you fear the consequences of not paying a medical bill for your kid is awful, and illegal and immoral, but kind of understandable. Holding up a gas station for the sheer thrill of it is reprehensible. The root of the fear seems to matter to us, and I think it's because we understand that stealing isn't about stuff, it's really about people and relationships.

The ten commandments came to the people as they were there, in the desert, just days after escaping slavery in Egypt. They were probably pretty fearful folks. I'm sure security felt like a far distant dream, and many of these families would have been motivated to seek their own security, perhaps at the expense of others. In fact, we know that they sometimes did! We know that when God sent manna to them in the desert, God said, don't go keeping any extra,

I'll send you enough for tomorrow. But the people were afraid, they kept the extra, and what happened? It rotted overnight. We know they were driven by their fear to do exactly what God said not to do. And I imagine stealing born of insecurity and fear, it could have been a real problem.

But the threat is less the loss of the given item or money, it's the loss of relationship. In a community where theft became the norm, how could neighbor trust neighbor? It would erode the very foundations of their community. And if that happened, they'd be lost before they even came to the promised land. Because their faith in God and faith in one another was all they really had build from. And God was trying to build a group of folks who not only trusted one another, but where stealing may not even be an issue, because they were theoretically supposed to take care of one another, ideally eliminating that fear.

Jesus talked about this, too. The whole, sell your possessions, give what you have to the poor. Paul and the early church were pretty strict about this, literally. They would share what they had, so that there was no need among them, each was supposedly taken care of. The ancient Hebrews were commanded to live this way, sharing what they had with one another, doing away with all debt, setting all

slaves and indentured servants free, and resetting all land ownership every 7 years. Can you imagine? A fully clean financial slate every 7 years. It was an idealistic system, certainly, but the goal is laudable: root out fear of scarcity by routinely levelling the playing field for all, by making sure all are cared for.

Now, the ancient Hebrews and the early Christians and all the rest had laudable ideas, and likely never fully lived up to all of it, try as they might have. And both groups, as they grew larger, landed, politically respected, and more established lost the thread of these early, radical ideas. But I think it's important to occasionally remind ourselves of these roots, and the call that we, too, might wish to emulate them, because of this commandment: do not steal.

A commandment that speaks to the fear we carry of not having enough, which is a fear I think we all live with to varying degrees at different points in our lives. It's a commandment concerned with our social relationships, and the security of our communities in general. And, of course, like all commandments, the positive is much harder to do than simply avoiding the negative. Didn't casually cat burgle or walk out of the grocery with that flat of fizzy waters on the bottom of my cart that I conveniently forgot to pay for. Check! But did I use the resources I have to provide for others, that they would

have enough? And what, really, is enough? That's a much more difficult scenario. There's a lot to unpack, and we're not going to do all of it today.

What I'd like to leave you with is this: this commandment builds a foundation we need for the next two weeks, when we talk about not lying and not coveting. This is, in a sense, the base of Maslow's hierarchy of commandments—first make sure your community's base needs are met, and from there, without the fear of hunger or thirst or scarcity, we can advance onto more noble and thoughtful pursuits. Take care of the needs of others, first. But also, if you need the reminder today, please don't leave worship and go to the Portland Art Museum and snatch a painting. But if you do, please take me out for coffee this week and tell me how you did it.