

BEG, BORROW, OR STEAL?

By Paul Penno

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A teacher was illustrating to her class about the difference between right and wrong. "All right children, let's take another example," she said. "If I were to get into a man's pocket and take his wallet and remove all his money, what would I be?" Little Johnny's hand went up. "I know, I know," he said. "All right Johnny," the teacher said, "What would I be?" With a confident smile Johnny says, "You'd be his wife."

Salesman A. H. Livingstone wasn't having much success selling high-quality art to hotel managers. His pictures cost more, he admitted, but he felt they were worth it; they turned a plain hotel room into something special.

"Don't you care about the quality of art you give your guests?" he asked a hotel manager in Los Angeles. "Don't you have any standards?"

"I have one standard," the manager replied calmly. "Any picture that goes in one of my rooms has to be too large to fit into a suitcase!"

Hotel managers count on one guest in three stealing something during his stay. Each year, 4,600 Bibles are stolen from hotel rooms.

If you have never stolen anything, you probably were born on Mars, because on earth "there is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10), and all the sons and daughters of Adam here have "become guilty before God" (verse 19). We all need a Savior!

The eighth of God's Ten Commandments says, "You shall not steal." Many people break that commandment without knowing it. They think it's impossible to obey it fully. But, rightly understood, it's an assurance of salvation from stealing, not a stern prohibition.

The reason why people think it's impossible to obey is that they have not understood the ten commandments that God gave to us on Mt. Sinai. They have forgotten part of what God spoke on that occasion. In the Preamble He says: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:1, 2). In these words He introduces Himself to us as being already our Savior.

He has already accomplished something, He has given Himself as a sacrifice for us; for every one of us He "poured out His soul unto death" (Isaiah 53:12). "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23), but

Christ has taken those “wages” on Himself, and has died those “wages” of death for “everyone” (Hebrews 2:9).

He does not want us to think of Himself as a possible, maybe, perhaps, might-be Savior if we first do everything right and never steal even a tiny dime. He wants us to see Him as He truly is—already “the Savior of the world” and therefore of us (John 4:42).

He says to us, “Now you will never steal. There will never be such a stain upon your record. You will hold your head high everywhere, and always! I will save you from that sin.”

The root of stealing is the desire to have something that God has not given us. This is the root that the gospel of Christ takes out of the heart. The Holy Spirit reminds us immediately that when He was with us on earth, Jesus said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matthew 8:20). Although He was a master builder (He was a carpenter) He owned no house, no real estate; He had no bank account. When He was crucified, all His wealth was the clothes He had on. Because He knew true inner peace, He could say truthfully, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15).

Paul knew the same inner peace when he said that “I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, . . . and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8). According to that, our endless love affair with materialism is diving into the dumpster. What joy there is in freedom from constantly hankering for luxuries! So we are encouraged to read this good news: “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content” (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

There are very few people who need to be told that it is wrong to break into a shop and rob a cash-box; that burglary, house-breaking, pocket-picking, and so forth, are criminal and sinful acts. These are all recognised as vulgar crimes, and because of this many suppose the commandments that forbid such things are out of date, so far as Christians are concerned, and that Christianity has outgrown them. Many people have said: “What do we need of the commandment, ‘Thou shalt not steal’? Everybody knows that stealing is wrong. Even a savage shows, by his attempt to conceal a theft, that he knows that it is not the right thing.” But we must again repeat that the

commandment is exceeding broad, surpassing man's highest thought of perfection. While all, with the possible exception of some who from infancy have been trained to theft, know that the grosser acts, of which the civil law takes notice, are sinful, there are very many professed Christians who in their daily business violate the eighth commandment without the slightest compunction.

If I use my employer's telephone for private calls, am I stealing? If I balance my checkbook on company time, am I stealing? If I deduct more than I am entitled to on my income tax, am I stealing? Many would answer, "It depends on the situation."

Most of us dismiss making photocopies or taking paper clips or typing paper from the office. These things are incidental to our general focus in life, and so we don't consider them violations of the commandment against stealing. We reason, The little I've taken doesn't amount to enough to matter."

The eighth commandment is an eternal defense against the false doctrine that is sometimes passed off as "Communism." Many honest, sincere people have assumed that Communism is the best plan for achieving equality among all people. But as we study the Bible, we find that God recognizes the right of private property. The so-called "communism" in the early church when the apostles "had all things common" and no one said "that any of things he possessed was his own," was a totally voluntary sharing in a time of emergency, It was motivated by brotherly love (Acts 4:32-34). It wasn't government taking by force from one individual to give to another.

Peter told Ananias and Sapphira that God recognized that their property was their own (Acts 5:4) because He has given man dominion over the earth. God has given man a right to the lawful fruits of his labor. "He who tills his land will have plenty of bread" (Proverbs 28:19). God does not force him to give it to those who do not "till" their land, but He does ask us to be generous to help others who are in need. The love of Christ would put an end to poverty all over the world! It would heal the abuses of both Capitalism and Communism.

In all our business dealings, God teaches His people to be strictly honest, as well as generous. "Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over" is God's way of doing business (see Luke 6:38). Norman Rockwell painted a famous picture of a merchant weighing the lady customer's selection of meat on a scale. While the merchant is looking up at the scale he is cleverly tipping the scale downward with his finger to make her purchase weigh more. At the

same time the customer is looking up at the scale but pushing it upward from underneath to make it lighter than it really was, so she could pay less than it was worth. But God says, "If you sell anything to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor's hand, you shall not oppress one another" (Leviticus 25:14).

Why are we so often anxious to get things for less than they are worth? Or equally anxious to sell things for more than they are worth? Why do we boast when we buy something for less than it's worth? "It is good for nothing," cries the buyer; but when he has gone his way, then he boasts" (Proverbs 20:14). The reason? It is basically our deep unbelief—doubt that the Lord will care for us by giving us all we need. No millionaire would haggle over the price of a bunch of carrots because he knows he can afford them at any price. We need to remember that since we are God's children, we are therefore "millionaires." "All things are yours: whether . . . the world or life or . . . things present or things to come—all are yours. And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

Gambling, whether legalized or not, is a violation of the eighth commandment. If a million people pay a dollar each into a lottery and then a "lucky" person wins that jackpot, it is not his money—in the sight of God. It is money that actually belongs to others and they should not have been enticed to part with it. Gambling is not "sport," it is selfishness gone wild. A mere handful of people win the jackpots while multitudes often lose either their life savings or their income which their families need for food and shelter.

There is a fatal lure in gambling that tells the victim of this obsession, "Just throw in a few more dollars and maybe you'll win." So on and on the poor victim of this deception pays out until he gets desperate. Gambling tragedies are terrible.

It may be said that if these victims don't use common sense, it's their fault; they should know better. But the problem is that gambling becomes an addiction of the same basic quality as alcoholism, heroin, or crack. The gambling addict gets to the point where he can't control himself. Such is the craving for something that is not ours.

There is glorious deliverance in the eighth commandment which is an assurance from the sin of breaking it. The Holy Spirit puts into the believing heart a hatred for taking anything that is not ours. This again is a miracle of grace! Love will motivate us to help the alcoholic not to take a drink, for he is an addict; it will also motivate us to help any addict who has lost his God-given power of self-control.

Perhaps the most famous thief of all history was one of Jesus' twelve disciples—Judas Iscariot. John tells us that Judas was the treasurer for the little group of Christ's disciples and that he secretly embezzled funds for his own use. His heart always wanted what was somebody else's; and this is what finally drove him to betray the Son of God (John 12:6).

The Holy Spirit has left his story on record for us to learn a good news lesson. After he was paid the "thirty pieces of silver" (the price of a slave!), he was so conscience-stricken for what he had done that he rushed to the Sanhedrin Council and threw the money down on the floor and went out and hanged himself. Now he hated the filthy money that never was rightfully his!

A young man came to see pastor F. E. Marsh and said, "Pastor, you have put me into a bad fix. I've stolen from my employer, and I'm ashamed to tell him about it. You see, I'm a boat builder and the man I work for is lost. I have talked with him about Christ, but he only laughs at me. In my work, expensive copper nails are used because they won't rust in water. I've been taking some of them for a boat I'm building in my backyard. I'm afraid if I tell my boss what I've done and offer to pay for them, he'll think I'm a hypocrite, and I'll never be able to reach him for Christ." When the preacher saw him again the man was excited. He said. "Pastor, I've settled that matter and I'm so relieved." What happened?" asked the preacher. "Oh, he looked at me intently and said, 'George, I've always thought you were a hypocrite, but now I'm not so sure. Maybe there's something to your Christianity after all. Any religion that makes a man admit he's been stealing must be worth having.'"

"Put your hands in your pockets," mother used to tell her boys when they went to stores. "Look at the merchandise, but don't touch." I'm sure other parents have done the same.

Sometimes handling things can create a desire to have things, and the Bible says, "Thou shalt not steal" (Ex. 20:15).

Both public and private sins are included in this prohibition. It condemns theft and robbery. It demands strict integrity in the minutest details of the affairs of life. It forbids overreaching in trade, and requires the payment of just debts or wages. It declares that every attempt to advantage oneself by the ignorance, weakness, or misfortune of another is registered as fraud in the books of heaven.

Josephine Cunningham Edwards tells of a young mother who pushed her two-year-old to town in her baby carriage. After her shopping was

done and she was almost home, the mother discovered a big red ball in the carriage. She questioned her little one, who said she got it “in the ‘tore.’” Mother explained that they would have to take it back because they had not paid for it.

Turning the carriage around, the mother went back to town, talking quietly to her little one all the way. She explained to the clerk, and the little girl tearfully returned the ball.

The clerk begged the mother to buy the ball, but the mother said, “Not today. Another day, yes, but not today. This is my baby’s first lesson in restitution. I do not want to spoil it.”

She could have sent the ball back with daddy, or paid for it the next time. But she did not. She wanted to teach her little one the meaning of “Thou shalt not steal.”

What about Johnny, who knows that mother has baked those cookies for a club meeting, but helps himself anyway? Isn’t Johnny stealing?

And what about the little boy who removes and eats the filling from a number of filled cookies, and then puts the two outer parts together? Isn’t he stealing—from the family’s future eating enjoyment?

If young people get a bite to eat at a favorite neighborhood spot, and then hurry out without paying, aren’t they stealing? And, of course, every form of shoplifting is stealing and can lead to a police record.

Even grown-ups sometimes fail to grasp the significance of the commandment “Thou shalt not steal.” Most of us wouldn’t think of stealing a car or breaking into someone’s home. But what of the little things?

Once, in an Adventist community, an act of stealing was witnessed in a hardware store. One of the clerks was touching up a stool with paint. When he was through, he put the lid on the paint can and set the can back on the shelf. Wasn’t he stealing—from a future customer?

And occasionally there are clerks and waitresses who pocket change or tips that belong in the cash register or to another waitress. Isn’t that stealing?

Can parents’ attitudes toward honesty affect their children? Have you ever come home from the store and realized that the clerk had made an error in your favor? What was your reaction? Did you think (or worse, say, in the presence of your children), “Oh, well, that’s too bad. Now I can spend the money for something else”?

After a friend got home from the grocery store she discovered that her little girl had taken a package of gum and put it in her pocket without asking her mother to pay for it. The mother didn't think it worth a trip back to the store to pay for the gum, and she didn't mention it the next time she was grocery shopping. Wasn't she stealing, as well as helping to form her little girl's ideas of right and wrong?

A lady bought five blouses for a coming vacation trip. When she got home, she discovered that the clerk had charged her for only four blouses. If she hadn't made another trip to town to pay for the fifth blouse, wouldn't she have been stealing?

What about reputations? Can these be stolen? I once drove past a place where a bulldozer was about to level a house. Upon my return a few hours later, I could hardly tell that a house had stood there. It had taken months to build that house, but only hours to tear it down. Reputation can be destroyed. Just so, it takes years to build a reputation. How unfortunate that reputation can be destroyed in minutes with a few wrong words. We wouldn't dream of entering a neighbor's home to take his money or possessions, but have we ever stolen his reputation in the community by gossip? When we are critical of the minister, the organist, the teacher, our neighbor, or a businessman, we are stealing from his reputation. Each has reasons for what he does.

We need to learn tolerance. David Dunn wrote: "Of all the gifts we can bestow on our friends and neighbors, and upon every person we encounter in our daily goings and comings, none is perhaps so rare as the gift of tolerance. It is as easy to be intolerant, critical, faultfinding, toward people as it is difficult to be fair and tolerant."

And again, "Any time you find yourself in a group of people who are talking about a friend or neighbor or fellow worker, if someone starts to disparage, you can so easily say something kind, or at least tolerant. It is surprising how often this will cause another to speak up and add something favorable to what you have said. Many a time the conversation will end by giving a good name to the person under discussion."

I'm sure we all have heard the Sioux Indian's prayer, "Great Spirit, help me never to judge another until I have walked two weeks in his moccasins."

In speaking of biting remarks, Maxine Rasmussen suggests that we don't realize "how this spirit of intolerance and harsh criticism is

soaking into the hearts and souls of our young children. They will go out to make their own records in the world, some of which we will deplore.”

So, whether it be a package of gum, an extra dollar in your favor, a bit of paint, some cooky filling, or someone’s reputation, remember, “Thou shalt not steal”!

What is the secret of all honesty? The Apostle Paul bears witness to the great liberality of the churches of Macedonia, in spite of their “great trial of affliction,” and “their deep poverty.” He did not need to plead with them to make an offering to the cause of God, but says, “To their power I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves, praying us with much entreaty that we would receive the gift.” The reason for this is that they “first gave their own selves to the Lord.” 1 Cor. 8:1-5. This is the secret of all honesty; for whoever is honest with the Lord will never defraud any man.

Not simply our property, but we ourselves belong to the Lord, and we are to render to Him His own. When we recognize that we are not our own, but that our whole being belongs to Him, we shall also recognize that we can have no property in our own right. Strength is more than money; and the commandment “Thou shalt not steal” forbids our robbing God of the strength that is His due. If I wantonly destroy my neighbor’s property it is the same as though I steal his goods. All our members belong to the Lord, as instruments of righteousness. If we misuse them in any way, making them serve our own personal gratification, we are guilty of theft. We owe to the Lord, not merely all the strength we may have at this present moment, but all that we might have if we lived according to the law of life in Christ Jesus.

And here we see again that the commandment is life everlasting. All God’s requirements are really statements of His promises. He asks nothing from us that He does not first give to us; and in making for it of us He does not ask that we give it to Him, in the sense that we ourselves are deprived of it, but that we always have it in possession to render to Him. So the commandment “Thou shalt not steal” requiring us to give all the strength of our soul and body to the Lord, means that if we heed His word He will see that we have perfect strength to give to Him. His commandments are not grievous, but on the contrary they assure us all blessings.

Danny Sampson robbed a bank in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. He used a hand-me-down Colt 45 and stole \$6000. When the Royal

Canadian Mounted Police caught him and confiscated the gun they sent the gun to the lab. The laboratory recognized the gun as a collector's prize. It was worth over \$100,000. Danny didn't have to rob a bank, he was wealthy and didn't know it.

Everything grows with use, so as we keep the commandment, yielding to God all the strength which His own everlasting power works in us, we shall go from strength to strength, until at last we appear in Zion strength, until at before God.

Maybe we should try prayer like Cindy Hartman of Conway, Arkansas. According to an Associated Press account, in September 1994 she walked into her house to answer the phone and was confronted by a burglar. He ripped the phone cord out of the wall and ordered her into a closet. Hartman dropped to her knees and asked the burglar if she could pray for him. "I want you to know that God loves you and I forgive you," she said. The burglar apologized for what he had done. Then he yelled out the door to a woman in a pickup truck: "We've got to unload all of this. This is a Christian home and a Christian family. We can't do this to them." As Hartman remained on her knees, the burglar returned furniture he had taken from her home. Then he took the bullets out of his gun, handed the gun to Hartman, and walked out the door. That is one way to disarm our enemies and probably the best way.

What a wonderful householder God is! how vast is His estate, and what an infinite number of tenants He has! But, unlike the tenants of most landlords, instead of contributing to His support, they subsist wholly on His bounty, paying no rent whatever. Thus, we read, "O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all: the earth is full of Thy creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, wherein are creeping things innumerable, both small and great beasts. . . . These wait all upon Thee, that Thou mayest give them their meat in due season. That Thou givest them they gather; Thou openest Thine hand, they are satisfied with good." They are all looking to the Lord for their food, and expecting that He will provide it. When the wild beasts roar, they are asking God for their portion. And He has already for them; He keeps them merely for the pleasure of seeing them enjoy themselves. What a source of encouragement this is for man made in His image to be a companion for Him, to trust Him for support.

Our dear Lord is so merciful to us: His Holy Spirit will teach us now, before it's too late, to learn to hate anything that is not ours by right.

This is how He will keep to us the blessed assurance that is in the eighth commandment—"You shall not steal." He saves us from the sin that ruined Judas Iscariot. That's something to be happy about for all eternity! Thank God for such a Savior!