

# You Shall Not Steal: Trust the Lord and Believe in His Word

A sermon by the Rev. Mark D. Pendleton  
March 7, 2010

A young man who was learning about the Ten Commandments once asked his father, “What’s so bad about stealing?”

That’s a fair question coming from a young person...so how would you answer it?

We might answer in some of the ways we did in the first part of our service this morning<sup>1</sup>—when we talked about some of the effects that stealing has on the person who is stolen from, on human society in general, and also on the person who steals. But let’s take the young man’s position for just a minute.

It’s true that when we look at the Commandment on *murder*, including (as it does) things like killing people, maiming them, and hating them and the Lord; *and* when we look at the Commandment on *adultery*, including (as it does) things like hurting marriage, disrespect for members of the opposite sex, and being unfaithful to what is good and true, and also to the Lord Himself, it’s pretty easy to see what’s wrong with *these* things. It’s also easy to understand why the Commandments on murder and adultery would be two of the leading teachings given to us by the Lord for how we love the neighbor. But when we get to the Commandment on stealing, it may not be as easy to see what’s so wrong with that particular evil.

Sure, when we think in terms of an investor who swindles innocent people out of their life’s savings; or when we think of someone who embezzles money from a company to the point that the company falters and eventually goes under; or when we think of the effects that stealing has on individuals, on trust in relationships, and on a sense of safety and security in human society, then it may be easy to see how wrong it is to steal.

But so much of the stealing that happens on a day-to-day basis does so on a much smaller scale:

- Chelsea borrows a CD of music from Jeanette and copies it for herself.
- Susan borrows a shirt or a blouse from Sandra. Later she remembers to return it, but then she doesn’t; she keeps it among her own stuff.
- George does the same thing with the screwdriver he borrowed from Clyde.

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<sup>1</sup> When preaching this sermon *not* in conjunction with a children’s service, this line can read, “We might answer this question in any number of ways; but let’s take....”

- And Marcel picks a couple of grapes from a fruit stand in the supermarket and thinks to himself, “I’m not doing anything wrong; I’m just *taste-testing*.” Then he takes three more grapes and moves on.

The fact is that so much of the stealing that goes on in our day-to-day lives is so small that we may not even think of it as being stealing; or the effects are so small that we may think, “What does it matter?” “What harm does it do?” “Everyone does it.”

So today, let’s look at the Lord’s Commandment on stealing. Let’s remind ourselves of some of the ways that people can steal, so that we can see the damage that it causes and so that we can get better ourselves at not stealing. But let’s also look at some of the things that *underlie* stealing, the effects that these things have on our lives, and some of the ways our lives can be blessed as we shun this particular evil as the sin that it is against God.

So, first off, what does stealing mean? To “steal” simply means to take what doesn’t belong to us without permission, unlawfully, and especially by stealth or pretense. Here are some examples of things that are specifically meant by the Commandment on stealing. On a natural or literal level it means—

- Not to steal, rob, or privateer in time of peace.
- Not to swindle.
- Not to profit, earn interest, or collect funds in illegal ways.
- Not to commit fraud in paying taxes and fees, or in repaying loans.
- Not to do your work dishonestly and deceptively.
- Not to mislead customers with merchandise that you’re selling in terms of weight, measurement and calculations.
- Not to dip into a worker’s pay.
- And applied to law, it means not to tilt judgments toward friends and relatives, or for bribes or other inducements.

On a spiritual level, spiritual wealth and riches have to do with the true ideas in our minds. So stealing on the spiritual level has to do with taking away a person’s knowledge of what is good and true by means of false ideas, and in this way stealing away that person’s faith and charity and robbing him or her of spiritual life.

Here are a few possible examples:

- Chelsea convinces Jeanette, against Jeanette’s conscience and better judgment, that it’s okay to copy Lynette’s CD of music. After all, everyone does it.
- Horatio persuades Clarisse to live together with him before marriage, saying to her that her religious belief of waiting until marriage is old, outdated, and Victorian.
- And Dale works a business deal in front of his son Shawn, demonstrating to his son that fast talking and intimidation are a good way to do business.

It's interesting: In each of these examples one person is effectively leading another person away from his or her *living* worship of the Divine, and in this way stealing away something of his or her faith.

Still on a spiritual level, stealing can include using the truth, not for its intended purpose—to help people—but do justify selfish intent instead. The New Testament story of the woman taken in adultery shows this well, where the woman's accusers were ready to use the truth of her wrongdoing as a tool for condemning her. Stealing can also include using any form of truth that we know to try to direct another person's life in a dominating way. And a final example of stealing on a spiritual level is any minister or priest who uses the truth of God's Word for the sake of personal recognition, fame, or financial gain.

But we've moved through the natural and spiritual levels of this Commandment quickly in order to get to the real heart of any theft. And we get to the heart of it on the deepest level of meaning for this Commandment which (in the New Church) we call the *celestial* or *heavenly* level of meaning.

Remember that the deepest level of meaning for any Commandment or story in Scripture has to do with our relationship with God—that is, our relationship with the Lord Himself. So on the deepest level, to steal means to *take from God* what doesn't belong to us and claim to it as our own. It means taking the power that the Lord gives us to accomplish good things in our lives and attributing it to ourselves—as though we *ourselves* are powerful, and not that we receive that power on a moment-to-moment basis from a generous Benefactor. To steal means to take credit to ourselves for the good feelings that we feel, the noble thoughts that we think, and the kind things that we say and do, and to be unable or unwilling ultimately to give the credit back to the Lord. One global way of saying this is that stealing involves an inability give Divine credit where Divine credit is due.

This type of stealing is actually an easy and common thing for many of us to do, as reflected in the story of the Garden of Eden. In the first three chapters of the Lord's Word, God created man and woman, and He said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Then God placed the man and woman whom He'd created in the Garden He had prepared for them, and He said to them, "You may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden you shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die."

Part of what we gain from this story is a sense of life and vitality that the Lord gives to each one of us who He creates. That sense of life and vitality are so *living* that they feel like they're our

very own: To us it *feels* like life starts right here [touches the area of his chest over his heart] or right here [touches his head], and it feels like it spreads outward to others from there.

But the truth of Scripture is that it is the Lord Himself who actually breathes the breath of life into us moment by moment. Without Him we can do nothing. And He tells us that it's important for us to acknowledge this truth, both in our rational minds, and also in a living way—by looking to Him as the source of guidance in our lives, and by living in ways He wants us to live. This is the main way in which we can be connected and together with the Lord—as it says in the gospel of John, “We in Him and He in us.”

Well, what's the point in all of this? The point is that at times when we forget to acknowledge the simple truth that everything good and worthwhile comes from the Lord, and that we need to look to Him for leadership and guidance, and that these things need to be reflected back to Him in the ways that we live—when we forget these things, we tend to get ourselves off track. We may start to think that we can navigate our way through life without the Lord's input, and that we can figure out what's right or wrong, best or worst, for any situation in our life, *on our own*—

“Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field, and he said to the woman, ‘[If you eat of the fruit of this tree] you will not surely die, for in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”

This is where spiritual theft can occur on the deepest level of our consciousness; and as said, it's an easy common thing to do. In fact, it takes most of us a lifetime to strike a balance in our lives—a balance in which we live the life that the Lord gives us to the fullest, and yet acknowledge in our heart, mind, and life that it all comes to us from Him.

So again, what's the point? The point is that when we stumble into spiritual theft—taking credit to ourselves for our personal qualities, attributes, and personal successes, what we may unwittingly do is start to rely more and more on ourselves to figure life out and to guide ourselves through it, and to rely less and less on the Lord for His leadership and guidance. Without realizing it, perhaps, we may start “playing God” in our own lives, living life more and more on our own terms and less and less on His. And, sad to say, at that point we ourselves start to be robbed of our faith and trust in Him. The fallout of this is that we're left carrying much of the burden and weight of our lives on our own shoulders, rather than feeling the moment-by-moment help and support of the Lord.

And notice what happened to Adam and Eve in the Garden after they'd tasted the forbidden fruit: When they heard Jehovah's voice calling out to them, they were *afraid* and hid themselves.

One of the outcomes of the subtle and deceptive spirit of theft is all of the worry, anxiety, and unhealthy fear that can be ushered into our lives as a result of it. When we attempt to take our lives out of the Lord's hands and into our own, we tend to experience more and more of these emotions and less and less of a genuine sense of peace and calm. Notice how this is put in New Testament Scripture, where Jesus says, "Who of you by worrying can add one cubit to *his stature?*"

What these things mean is that at times when we experience a lack of peace in our lives, or at times when our lives feel like they're being driven by things like worry, anxiety, or unhealthy fear, it may be an indication to us that we're beginning to slip into the evil of spiritual theft, and that our faith and trust in the Lord may be getting stolen away from us.

If we can see these indications, and turn away from spiritual theft, and turn back to the Lord as the source of guidance and goodness for our lives, then our lives can begin to open up again, and we begin (sometimes literally) to breathe easier:

- We find ourselves able to leave other people to their own goods—both natural and spiritual.
- We seek new truth for our lives and use it only in support what is good and true in others.
- We're able to live life to the fullest, while at the same time looking to the Lord for the help and guidance we need.
- We are open and receptive, honest and sincere. We have nothing to hide.
- We trust the Lord and believe in Him.
- And deep down inside we are at peace and content, knowing that we are safe and secure under the Lord's care and guidance.

So, what makes the evil of stealing to be one of the leading things to avoid in our efforts to love our neighbor is not only the hurt and deception that it introduces into human relationships and human society, but also the damaging effects it has on our *own* spirits and psyche (or we might say, the damaging effects it has on the "neighbor" in each one of us) as it steals away our faith and trust in the Lord, and as it robs us of a sense of safety, peace, and contentment in Him.

"Therefore thus says the Lord God, 'I will make a covenant of peace with them,...and they will dwell safely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. I will make them a blessing.... Then the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield her increase, and they shall be safe in their land. They shall feed their flocks and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid.'" (Ezek. 34:20,25-27, Zeph. 3:13) Amen.

Readings: Ex. 20:1-6,15; Gen. 3:1-13; John 10:1-5,7-10

In the *natural sense*, the commandment, *You shall not steal* means not to steal, rob, or commit piracy in time of peace; and in general, not to take away anyone's goods secretly or under any pretext. It also extends to all impostures and illegitimate gains, usuries, and exactions; all frauds in paying taxes and duties and in discharging debts; doing work unfaithfully and deceitfully; practicing deceit in merchandise, weight, measure, and accounts; giving judgment for friendship, reward, relationship, or others reasons, and the like. (*True Christianity* 317)

In the *spiritual sense*, to steal means to deprive others of the truths of their faith, which is done by means of falsities and heresies. For example, priests who minister solely for gain or from a lust for honor, and who teach what they see or might see from the Word to be untrue, are spiritual thieves, since they take away from the people the means of salvation, which are the truths of faith. (*True Christianity* 318)

In the *celestial (or heavenly) sense*, thieves mean those who take away from the Lord His Divine power; also those who take for themselves His merit and righteousness. These, even if they adore God, still do not trust in Him but only in themselves, and also do not believe in God, but only in themselves. (*True Christianity* 319)

So far as a person refrains from evils and shuns and turns away from them as sins, good flows in from the Lord. But a person cannot refrain from evils by shunning and turning away from them of him- or herself; it must be the Lord, who is the Divine good and the Divine truth, who causes him to shun them. Nevertheless, a person ought to shun evils **as if** of himself, for what a person does as if of himself becomes his and is appropriated to him as his own; while what he does not do as if of himself in no way becomes his. (*Apocalypse Explained* 971:2)

So far as the various kinds of theft are removed, so far the kinds of good that are opposite to them enter and take their place; and these have reference in general to what is sincere, right, and just. For when a person shuns and turns away from unlawful gains through fraud and craft, so far he wills what is sincere, right, and just, and at length he begins to love what is sincere because it is sincere, what is right because it is right, and what is just because it is just. (*Apocalypse Explained* 973:2)