

Exodus 20 v15 Do not steal

Introduction

In the medieval period a number of diseases were at times of epidemic proportions. In recent decades in the United Kingdom one of the biggest problems is theft. A KPMG survey reported in *Human Resources Magazine* revealed that 28% of managers and employees had seen colleagues steal from the workplace; 27% knew of staff that had fiddled their expenses and 23% had seen someone stealing money (*The Times*, 24 March 2005). *The Times* newspaper on 1 June 2011 had the headline: 'Britain: a nation of cheats and thieves', based on a survey of theft in the workplace. The survey showed that around 75% of people in the UK admitted to stealing from their employers, 25% of whom intentionally created opportunities to steal and the other 50% did so as the opportunity arose. This is not an attractive picture of the level of integrity in our nation. It happens at all levels of our society. It is also rooted in our culture. The General Public, or at least some of us, were horrified by the nature and extent of claims for MP's expenses, exposed by the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper in May 2009. A few so-called 'honourable members' were convicted in court for what they had done; but the vast majority evaded natural justice as a result of obeying the carefully crafted laws they had put in place to allow them to enrich themselves at the tax-payers expense. It is to be wondered how much of the public outrage was because they got away with it rather than because they had inflated their 'expenses'? Yet ordinary workers have been just as guilty at times. In the prosperous post-war years at John Brown's Shipyard on the Clyde, there were 500 wage rates in that one yard. According to the records the ships were built mainly at the weekends, on overtime and half the workers skipped Mondays and Tuesdays! This was bad enough, but the rate of theft of goods was almost institutionalised. In the 1960s when the Queen Elizabeth II ship was being constructed, it was reported that: 'Many a Clydeside house was proudly equipped with QE2 doorknobs and a patch of pink, puce and plum carpet from the main ballroom' (*The Sunday Times* (archive section), 19 June 2011). Much theft, though, is unspectacular and carried out by otherwise respectable people. VAT fiddled, tax evaded, grant or social security applications filled out dishonestly; goods for sale misleadingly packaged or advertised to potential customers, who might in turn bounce cheques or pay with a stolen credit card. Many people might reject overt forms of theft, but taking the occasional extra 'sick-day' off; or using company office supplies or phones for personal use can so easily become a part of a regular routine. Some years ago an employee of a company used the franking machine in their office premises to mail Christmas cards to other people in the company, including the managing director, at company expense. It never occurred to the individual that he should have paid the cost of postage. The eighth commandment simply says: *Do not steal*.

1. Theft is wrong

(a) **Because it violates the God-given right to own property** In Genesis 2:15-17 God gave some clear guidelines to Adam in the Garden of Eden; He was not to take fruit from one particular tree, to do so would be theft. *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.* ¹⁶*And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.'* I am not convinced that there were any unusual features about that tree. On the contrary God wanted Adam to accept His boundaries. Their relationship needed to be based on trust. Sometimes there can be misunderstanding about the biblical teaching on ownership of goods, as a result of a particular interpretation of stories

like the account of the meeting of Jesus with a rich young man. Mark 10:22-25 states: ²¹ *Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'* ²² *At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.* ²³ *Jesus looked round and said to his disciples, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!'* ²⁴ *The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!'* ²⁵ *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'* However, it was the attitude to his wealth not the possession of it that Jesus was addressing in that passage. This is confirmed by the solemn encounter Peter had with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. The Jerusalem Church had held some kind of gift day. Members contributed as they felt led and were able to do so. However, this couple boasted about giving a greater sum than they had actually given. Peter, prompted by the Holy Spirit, challenged Ananias about his wrongdoing in Acts 5:3-4: ³ *Then Peter said, 'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?'* ⁴ ***Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.'*** A tiny proportion of Christians over the centuries have practised communal ownership of goods, that was or is their choice, but it is not commanded or even commended in the Bible.

(b) **Because it can easily escalate into other crimes** Is there anyone who would be pleased to have their home broken into or their possessions stolen? Of course not! A person setting off to steal runs the risk of violence being necessary to carry out their crime. James in his letter highlights the problem of the heart behind theft and related crimes: *What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?'* ² *You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.* ³ *When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (4:1-3).* On Thursday 3 May 2012, Radio 5 Live had a phone in that covered the story of one of the young men convicted for his part in the London riots of the previous year. On the surface his sentence seemed harsh, yet one of the victims of the riots then spoke of the hidden costs to the victims and their families. A Tottenham carpet warehouse was broken into and presumably some carpets taken, but the premises were torched to cover up the crime. Above the warehouse were sixty-five flats whose occupants lost all their possessions; some of those families are still in Bed and Breakfast accommodation a year later. Another more tragic incident concerned sixty-eight year old Richard Mannington Bowes, who sought to put out a fire in a litter bin started by rioters. He was punched by one of them on 8 Aug 2011, and died three days later in hospital. This may seem a world away from minor pilfering from an office –and it is –but we have a culture today in which stealing has become almost legitimate. When the boundaries of integrity are crossed inappropriately it is almost inevitable that some people will lose any sense of place or proportion. Honesty with respect to minor possessions will ensure temptations to major acts of theft are much easier to resist.

(c) **Being honest about stealing** This begins with integrity in speech. We will only 'borrow' things we genuinely intend to return. 'Helping ourselves to things' because they were there or because they 'fell off the back of a lorry' is out for a person of integrity. Likewise 'engaging in creative accounting' or being 'less than totally transparent' with tax inspectors is also inappropriate. It is also very possible in speech to say something that is legal and technically correct, but knowingly convey an impression that is false. There are many contexts in private conversations, to negotiations in the workplace where this might happen. In addition, purchasing goods or services without having an idea how you might pay for them is also potentially in violation of this commandment. A lot of people take the view, especially when pilfering goods from major companies, that it is a victimless crime as the insurance company

will pay out. However, the general public pays higher prices in the shops for goods and services as a result of covering the costs of the activities of thieves. And when the theft takes place through an intruder in your own home, the loss is even worse as it is a violation of your private space. It is interesting in the list of backgrounds of sinful lifestyles from which the Corinthian Christians were converted included *thieves...greedy people...and swindlers* (I Corinthians 6:10). If we can maintain high standards in our workplace or wherever we are then this example will be noted by others who might otherwise have been tempted to act inappropriately.

2. Is Stealing always wrong?

This is not an issue for the overwhelming majority of us living in the UK. We have the essentials for survival, but what about the people who don't? In November 1620 the Pilgrim Fathers landed at Cape Cod in New England. They were exhausted and dispirited after a long and difficult trip. They had little food and were overwhelmed at the sight of endless forests with wild animals and potentially hostile Indians hiding nearby. The weather was freezing cold and they faced the very real possibility of death by starvation had they not come across a buried supply of corn, presumably placed there by Indians. This fortunate find probably saved their lives. However, they had a conscience issue because of the eighth commandment. It was not should we take it –because to refuse to do so would have meant death for them and their wives and children, rather how should we recompense the people who put the food there in the first place? They concluded: 'In the sight of God it is a sin to steal, though it would be a greater sin to allow our families to die when food is available, so we will pledge ourselves to replace it though the Indians know nothing of it.' Fast forward to the nineteenth century and a meeting in London . Late one evening the famous social reformer Lord Shaftesbury was invited to address a meeting of around 400 men, at a gathering arranged by a London City Mission worker. It was a cold dimly-lit room. Present were a group of men with some of the worst criminal records in the city. The guest speaker urged them to give up a life of crime and violence and adopt a new way of life. However, when invited to respond many of the men with tears admitted they had no alternative but to steal to prevent their wives and children from starving. On reflection Shaftesbury wondered if the luxurious lifestyles of a minority in London had contributed to or caused the suffering of the many in need? The Old Testament law made provision for feeding the poor and marginalised and in that context enforced the eighth commandment. For example, Leviticus 19:9-11: "*When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.*"¹¹ "Do not steal. God has a particular concern for the welfare of the people on the margins of society ensuring that their basic needs are met. In our well-off country it is totally unacceptable that a single person should have no food to eat, adequate clothes to wear and a roof over their heads. I thank God for the Evangelical Christian leaders in nineteenth century Scotland, for example (most notably Glasgow Baptist shoe-shop owner William Quarrier), who ensured that no child should need to live rough on the streets of our cities with no-one to care for them. It is sobering that this only took place just over one hundred years ago. In 2012 the need for food banks is a fresh reminder of how close to the margins some people are currently living. I thank God that we have been able to support Ewan Guerr and his team in providing some funds and some food to assist their work of feeding needy families. Stealing is always wrong, but in some cases it is a lesser evil. In a civilised society we must continue to ensure that there is no justification for this in our land.

3. The Remedy for theft

(a) **Strive for personal integrity** It is easy to point the finger and say that ‘everyone is doing it’ as an excuse for not respecting other people’s property. When we borrow money individually or in business loans it should be with the intention of honouring our obligations. The mess that Ranger Football Club have got themselves into is a reminder of how bad things can get when dishonesty in lesser things escalates into a major crisis that affects many people even outside that football club. Psalm 37:21 states: *The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously*; it goes beyond money to goods. How many libraries have lost a fortune with books borrowed but not returned? How much software is illegally downloaded from the internet? There will always be grey areas in that field, but wholesale downloading of musical files or other goods, especially if for profit to resell is clearly illegal and putting the individual concerned at risk of a potential prosecution. Sadly Christians are not exempt from being careless in this regard. The general principle of Matthew 7:12: *In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you* applies in this situation.

(b) **Seek integrity in the workplace** We must have the deepest sympathy for the people out of work who have done their very best to find it but are unsuccessful. However, work is not a necessary evil, even if we joke about it at times. Instead it is intended by God as a means to contribute to society and to take pleasure in the accomplishment of tasks for fair remuneration for our service. Ephesians 6:7-8 reminds us to work: *wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will, reward everyone for whatever good he does whether he is slave or free*. Honesty in the conduct of business is essential. Proverbs 16:11 reminds us: *Honest scales and balances are from the Lord* –we don’t need Trading Standards inspectors to remind us of this requirement. Deuteronomy 24: 15 warns against bosses who delayed paying wages on time to impoverished workers: *Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin*. Today’s equivalent is ‘the cheque is in the post’ – too common a practice in our culture today. Human sinfulness in both employers and employees can be an issue to guard against, in order for all to work together for the common good. There can be a cost to integrity in the workplace. Some years ago a Christian got a management position in a city cleansing department and was responsible for a team of staff in that city. He quickly found out about an overtime racket that many people had benefited from in recent years. As a Christian he put a stop to it at once, but a lot of people had come to expect a sizable proportion of their income to result from this theft from the taxpayers of that city. He was savagely beaten one day by a group of men, almost certainly employees and later left the job. It can take courage to walk the lonely path of right practice sometimes. However, on other occasions change can result through a positive witness. J. John reported the conduct of a Christian civil servant who was aware of widespread theft and inflation of expenses in his workplace. He was determined not to join in this malpractice. In addition the office photocopiers and phones were used for lengthy print runs or long phone calls that had no connection to the workplace and others began to notice that he didn’t participate in this misuse of company resources. At first he was criticised for his standards, but graciously ignoring it, he persevered and eventually the office culture changed for the better with much higher standards. In this case a quiet personal witness through his own choices, and without words, led to the transformation (J. John, *Ten*, pp. 90-91). When we see wrongdoing we can ignore it and privately complain to ourselves, we can where appropriate suggest a better way or at the very least seek to set good personal standards of integrity and hope that it will be effective as in this latter case. In the New Testament there is the well-known account of Jesus meeting the dishonest businessman Zacchaeus. The overwhelming majority of people in Jericho had written him off as a lost cause, but not Jesus. Though, He was criticised for attempting to change this man. Luke records the following account of this story: *All the people*

saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.”¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” (Luke 19:7-10). Never underestimate what a good example can achieve. Other people will always notice the choices we make for good or bad!

(c) **Seek integrity in economic choices we make** it is encouraging that in the past decade the principle of Fairly-traded goods has allowed us to make wise purchases when shopping. No longer can we overlook the fact that excessively cheap products in our shops are often the result of wages stolen from helpless people in Third World countries. Campaigns against bonded labour and other aspects to this problem, including child labourers on the cocoa plantations in West Africa, are increasingly being addressed, but the scale of the problem is huge. In times of economic recession the pressure are huge on Western Governments to cut back in this area and reduce international development aid. It is one of very few areas where politicians from the different major parties emerge with credit as they have consistently refused cease assisting some of the most needy people in the developing world. Governments and the International Monetary Fund also need to be wise in the loans they offer to poorer countries. Too often they are exploited with punitive interest rates or to obtain precious raw materials at less than a fair market price. Increasingly issues relating to the environment are of concern. The pressures to grow crops to produce biofuels is also problematic. A 2008 World Bank report concluded that increased biofuel production is the major cause of the increase in food prices. (Donald Mitchell, *A Note on Rising Food Prices*. World Bank, 2008). Biofuels are crops grown for fuel rather than food. GM giant Monsanto has been at the heart of the lobbying for biofuels — while profiting enormously from the resulting food crisis and using it as a PR opportunity to promote GM foods! “The climate crisis was used to boost biofuels, helping to create the food crisis; and now the food crisis is being used to revive the fortunes of the GM industry.” (Daniel Howden, Africa correspondent, ‘Hope for Africa lies in political reforms’, *The Independent*, 8 September, 2008). Too often some of the loudest voices promoting green energy are companies that stand to benefit from it. It would be easy to be cynical and stop trying to make a difference. However, God gave us the creation mandate to take care of this world and we cannot evade our responsibilities, as much as it is up to us.

(d) **Seek integrity in our attitude towards the things we possess** In Matthew 6 Jesus sought to advise His disciples to have a responsible attitude to the things we possess. Zacchaeus, in the story mentioned earlier, was outrageously generous in refunding people he had previously defrauded. He was able to do that fairly easily as he had simply hoarded his vast wealth. But for him it was a principle of doing the opposite of what he had previously done. We live in a culture where many people assume that others will only do good things if they are paid for it. Virtually every month our street chaplain’s team is asked how much we are paid for patrolling the streets while the nightclubs and licensed premises are open. They are amazed at the response, and some keep pressing to find out some hidden benefit to us –it surely cannot be simply to do it for God and to help other people! Dom Helder Camara(1909-1999), a famous former Roman Catholic Bishop in North East Brazil and educational reformer, once said: ‘I used to think, when I was a child, that Christ might have been exaggerating when He warned about the dangers of wealth. Today I know better. I know how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one’s eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people’s hands, eyes, lips and hearts’. Another of his memorable quotations was this: “When I gave food to the poor they called me a saint. When I asked why they were poor, they called me a communist.” Jesus said: ³¹ *So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’* ³² *For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.* ³³ *But seek first His kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well* (Matthew 6:31-33). Earlier in the same passage Jesus also said: *For where your treasure is there your heart will be also* (Matthew 6:21). In a beautiful passage at the end of Proverbs there is a simple prayer of an obscure man called Agur. It reads: “*Two things I ask of you, Lord; do not refuse me*

before I die:⁸ *Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.* ⁹ *Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God* (Proverbs 30:7-9). It is not how much we have that counts, but how we use what we have that is important. Robert Edmiston, the founder of the IM Group, the car importer, was worth around 352 million pounds. He plans to give away at least 300 million of that to good causes (J. Parmiter, *Ten at Work*, p.72). We could say that he would hardly be suffering with what he had left, but how few of the very wealthy even think in the terms he has done? All of us could give a handful of names, but the list is alarmingly short compared to the number of millionaires and billionaires living in the UK. We are all stewards of what we possess; therefore we have an obligation to use our resources wisely and effectively.

(e) **Seek to honour God in our giving to His work** In II Corinthians 9:6-8, Paul wrote: *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* ⁷ *Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* ⁸ *And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.* I am really thankful to God for the generosity of people in this church to various causes overseas. We do not impoverish ourselves by being generous to others. Malachi, an obscure prophet writing a few hundred years before Jesus' day, was alarmed at the lack of generosity in giving to God's work. He gave this challenge to his hearers: *Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty "But you ask, 'How are we to return?'"* ⁸ *"Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?'"* *"In tithes and offerings.* ⁹ *You are under a curse —your whole nation—because you are robbing me.* ¹⁰ *Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it* (Malachi 3:7-10). God honours those that honour Him and that includes our giving of tithes and offerings. Jesus in a lengthy challenge to some religious leaders of His day, included these words: ²³ *"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things* (Matthew 23:23 NLV).

As we seek to live for God may He not only enable us not to break this commandment, but also to live generous lives that benefit not only ourselves, but our families, our church and community and the wider world in which we have the privilege of living, Amen.