

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 10, 2025
9:30 AM

Text: Exodus 20:15, Isaiah 10:1-4 & Matthew 25:41-46

Theme: Generosity & Justice: Do Not Steal

[prayer]

When I think of the commandment not to steal, I think of an after school special where the proverbial teenager is caught shoplifting. They slip that lip gloss or pack of gum into their bag when no one is looking, but eventually they are found out and their parent frog-marches them down to the corner convenience store where, head hanging low, they hand the contraband over and apologize to the stern shopkeeper behind the counter. The narrator intones, “Remember kids: Don’t steal.” And the credits roll.

The prevalence of theft in our society is evident in all the technologies we have in place to guard against it: Merchandise detectors at the entrance to big box stores. Steering wheel locks. Security cameras and alarm systems. Encrypted bank transfers. Two-factor authentication. Those annoying, bulky tags on blue jeans only retailers can remove.

Like the prohibition against murder and adultery – which are also both forms of theft, if you think about it – the prohibition against stealing shows up in almost every ancient legal code. This is a moral problem endemic among human beings.

To steal is to take something that is not yours. In ancient agrarian societies, the prohibition against stealing was especially important because the most common form of property – livestock like sheep and goats – had a tendency to wander off. There was no LoJack for sheepherders. Exodus 23:4 reads, “When you happen to come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey that has wandered off, you should bring it back to them” (CEB). In other words, if you find something that doesn’t belong to you, return it to its rightful owner. Keeping what you found is stealing. Even if that something belongs to your enemy, you should still give it back. You should do this

because if your animal was lost, you would want it returned. Jesus said, “Do unto others as you would have them do to you” (Matt 7:12 NRSVUE).

Jesus also said, “First take the log out of your eye, and then you’ll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s or sister’s eye” (Matt 7:3-5 CEB). Before we pat ourselves on the back for not stealing our neighbor’s wandering sheep, here are some common, everyday scenarios of theft we perhaps *have* committed:

- Keeping cash we find lying on the ground. “Finders, keepers, losers, weepers” is not biblical.
- Not correcting our server when they accidentally leave a beverage off our bill. Their mistake does not give us license to steal from the restaurant.
- Overstating the value of our charitable donations or underreporting our income on our taxes. That is stealing from the government. It is also stealing from other taxpayers, including future generations.
- Borrowing something but never giving it back. Even if the lender forgot we borrowed the item, we are still stealing.
- Using someone else’s streaming account to watch our favorite show. (Boy am I guilty of this one!)
- Stealing someone’s time by being late. (I’m guilty of this one, too.)
- Plagiarizing or taking credit or praise that does not belong to us.

As Rev. Adam Hamilton points out, every one of us is a thief.¹

The eighth commandment – like the third (“Do not take the Lord your God’s name in vain”) – is easy to trivialize. If we reduce it to the limited scenarios of shoplifting or breaking and entering, then we are ignoring the profound, ethical law God has established in this command. The eighth commandment is about more than the protection of private property. Most biblical scholars believe the prohibition against stealing was first about not stealing *people*.² “Thou shalt not steal *a person*.” God was prohibiting kidnapping and enslaving someone.

Slavery was an accepted practice in the ancient world, including among the Israelites. And it was not that long ago that slavery was an accepted practice in the

¹ Adam Hamilton, *Words of Life: Jesus and the Promise of the Ten Commandments Today* (New York: Convergent Books, 2020), 166.

² The Hebrew word in the eighth commandment that is translated as “steal” is elsewhere translated as “kidnap.”

modern world, too. Today, chattel slavery – owning another human being as property – is illegal worldwide, but we still have forms of slavery. Human trafficking, forced labor, forced marriage, and debt bondage are all examples. According to the United Nations' International Labour Organization, 27.6 million people are trafficked worldwide annually.³ For perspective, 12.5 million people were enslaved during the transatlantic slave trade, which is what most of us think about when we hear the word "slavery".⁴ More than three quarters of the people trafficked today are trafficked for the purpose of forced labor in industries like agriculture, manufacturing, domestic service, and hospitality. The remainder are victims of sex trafficking. Most victims are adults, but eight percent are children. In some countries, children are abducted and coerced into fighting in wars. There are no reliable statistics on the amount of people trafficked in the United States, but cases of human trafficking have been reported in all fifty states and the District of Columbia, as well as all U.S. territories and Tribal Lands.

These are terrible, sobering statistics. And the ethical demands of the eighth commandment go even further. Fundamentally, this commandment is about not exploiting people for personal profit. An employer may not be trafficking in forced labor, but they may still exploit their workers by withholding wages, paying a substandard wage, suppressing the right to collective bargaining, or maintaining substandard working conditions.

In his epistle to the church, James writes, "Pay attention, you wealthy people!...Consider the treasure you have hoarded in the last days. Listen! Hear the cries of the wages of your field hands. These are the wages you stole from those who harvested your fields. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of heavenly forces. You have lived a self-satisfying life on this earth, a life of luxury. You have stuffed your hearts in preparation for the day of slaughter" (5:1-5).

Anyone who gets rich by exploiting the poor breaks the eighth commandment. This is because they are stealing that person's ability to live the full and dignified life that God intended. They are making it more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve the goods of selfhood: food, shelter, healthcare, education. Biblical scholar Walter J. Harrelson writes, "The commandment not to steal means, in

³ <https://www.dhs.gov/human-trafficking-quick-facts>

⁴ <https://www.neh.gov/news/voyages-the-transatlantic-slave-trade-database>

effect, that persons are not to whittle down, eat away at, the selfhood of individuals or of families or of communities.”⁵

There are numerous examples in Scripture of God’s anger toward those who oppress the poor. Yes, the market makes it possible to pay someone a subsistence wage. Even the law of the land can make it so. For example, the minimum wage in the state of Idaho is \$7.25/hour,⁶ the same as the federal minimum wage, which has not changed since 2009,⁷ despite the cost of living increasing precipitously. That reality really puts the words of the Prophet Isaiah in perspective:

“Doom to those who pronounce wicked decrees,
and keep writing harmful laws
to deprive the needy of their rights
and to rob the poor among my people of justice...” (10:1-2).

We do not worship the market, nor the law of the land. We worship Yahweh. And Yahweh commands us to take care of the poor. James warns that any person who enriches themselves by taking advantage of the poor will face God’s judgment. I wonder what he would say to the multibillionaire oligarchs amassing power and riches in our world today. The Bible compels us to ask, *Is our economy fair? Is it just? Who benefits from the status quo...and who is being left behind?*

The eighth commandment is not just about the theft of private property. It is about the theft of dignity, the theft of bodily autonomy, the theft of self-determination, the theft of a person’s future. That last one is especially important. When we fail to address climate change, for example, we are stealing clean air and water and a livable climate from future generations (and all of God’s creatures). When we do not prioritize fully funding our schools, we are stealing from the education and prosperity of future generations. When we go to war, we are stealing the peace (and the lives) of future generations.

The judgment James warns of is echoed in the words of Jesus that were read this morning. While we call it the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, these words are actually part of an apocalyptic drama that depicts the Parousia – the second

⁵ Walter J. Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 42.

⁶ <https://www.labor.idaho.gov/businesses/labor-laws/labor-laws-faq/>

⁷ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/history>

coming of Christ. Jesus teaches that the Parousia will be good news for the righteous but bad news for the unrighteous. A righteous person, Scripture says, is someone who puts their faith into action in the present. Jesus teaches that at the end of time, the measure of God's judgment will not be a particular theology, creed, or statement of belief. The chief criterion will be whether you saw Jesus in the faces of the needy and gave yourself away to them in love. Sacrificial acts of love constitute "the weightier matters of the Law" by which we will all be judged (Matt 23:23).

Jesus came in the flesh to save all flesh. His ministry was not the salvation of souls to the exclusion of people's bodies. He was also focused on the very human needs of the people he came to serve – diseased limbs, hungry mouths, lonely hearts. Mother Teresa said,

"God has identified himself with the hungry, the sick, the naked, the homeless; hunger, not only for bread, but for love, for care, to be somebody to someone; nakedness, not of clothing only, but nakedness of that compassion that very few people give to the unknown; homelessness, not only for a shelter made of stone, but that homelessness that comes from having no one to call your own."⁸

Jesus says that when we tend to the humanity of the weak and vulnerable, we are in fact tending to him. Likewise, when we ignore their humanity, we are ignoring him. We believe that God is always with us, but especially in the neighbor who needs us. We are called to look in every human face and see the face of Jesus looking back and treat that person with the same honor and dignity we would treat the King of creation.

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats promises a grand reversal at the end of time. The unrepentant rich and powerful who trample on the needs of the poor will face God's judgment. The blessed in the Kingdom of Heaven will be those who gave generously to their suffering neighbor. At the beginning of this series, I remarked that for every "thou shalt not" Jesus demonstrates a life-giving "thou shalt." The life-giving flipside of the eighth commandment is a life centered on generosity and compassion. For Jesus, the command is not just to avoid taking what doesn't belong to us. We are called to go further and deliberately seek to bless and serve our neighbor.

⁸ <https://sojo.net/articles/voice-day-mother-teresa-calcutta>

It is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). At the root of theft is greed. And at the root of greed is a fear of scarcity. We are afraid that there is not enough for everyone. But Jesus teaches us otherwise. In God's kingdom, there is more than enough because God's kingdom is defined by generosity. We open our tightly clenched fists to a God who says *I will provide*...and we learn to trust. We learn to trust that when we are generous with our belongings, our time, our compassion, God makes a miracle. God makes a feast out of two fishes and five loaves of bread.

Generosity is how we combat greed. Generosity is how we build the Kingdom of Heaven.

Every one of us is a thief. But do not forget that when Jesus was crucified, he was crucified between two thieves. One thief mocked Jesus. But the other pleaded, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And with the greatest generosity of spirit, Jesus replied, "I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).

The last sinner Jesus forgave before he died was a thief.

Thanks be to God. Amen.