

## **The Eighth Commandment**

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

*Olentangy Church*

*July 18, 2010*

### **Genesis 37:23-27**

*Joseph was his father Jacob's favorite son. His brothers had a different opinion. So, when Joseph came to see them at Dothan, they hatched a plot to get rid of him.*

When Joseph reached his brothers, they pulled off his tunic – the ornamented tunic that he wore – and they took him and threw him into a cistern; (and the cistern was empty, there was no water in it). Then they sat down to eat, and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to take down to Egypt. And Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come on, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites, then we won’t have laid hands on him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed.

### **Ephesians 4:25-32** NRSV

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

### **Children's Story**

Sammy the Squirrel never got to meet his Aunt Serena. Before Sammy was born, Serena the Squirrel had been caught stealing acorns from other squirrel families, acorns they had stored away for the winter inside hollow trees. That was about the worst thing a squirrel could do! Stored-up acorns were a matter of life and death for a squirrel family. They needed those acorns to survive a long, cold winter. To steal those acorns . . . that almost amounted to murder.

So when Serena the Squirrel was found out, all the other squirrels of the Great Forest sent her away. They made the decision together. They didn't care where Serena lived from then on, as long as it wasn't in the Great Forest. So they sent her away. Away from her home. Away from her family. Away from everything she had ever known. It was a very hard punishment. But in the Great Forest, that was the punishment for stealing acorns.

### **Sermon**

On its surface, the Eighth Commandment is simple: “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15). It's hard to imagine a statement more simple or more obvious. Yet there's more to the Eighth Commandment than what appears on the surface. Sometimes I think all of Scripture is like that.

Did you hear about or see the new discoveries near Australia, in the deep waters around the Great Barrier Reef? All sorts of previously unseen creatures, including an amazingly beautiful jellyfish. On the surface, the ocean is so simple. But underneath the surface . . . !

It's easy to read or hear the Eighth Commandment and to let ourselves off the hook. The surface meaning of the commandment is simple and obvious. And we simply and obviously haven't violated it. Right?

**To begin with, the Eighth Commandment forbids out and out stealing.** What George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and the rest did in *Ocean's Eleven*? The Eighth Commandment doesn't look with favor on that. Do it under the cover of darkness, do it at gunpoint, do it through a clever deception (call it an “investment

opportunity,” if you want), and God disapproves. Do it in one grand gesture, like the art thief in Paris who stole five masterpieces from the Museum of Modern Art, works by Matisse, Picasso, and others, worth hundreds of millions of dollars — do that, and God disapproves. Do it for kicks, and God disapproves as well.

Around the time of that art theft, Martha was with some of her friends at the Old Bag of Nails restaurant in Westerville. For kicks, one of the kids told the waiter that someone in the group was celebrating a birthday. That meant a humongous slice of chocolate cake, for free, a slice of cake they all enjoyed. When Martha told us about it, she was surprised to hear me use the word “fraud.” But with a little explanation, she understood that what they had done was wrong, that it was stealing. A day or two later, Jan took Martha back to the restaurant. Martha confessed to the manager and offered to pay for the cake. He said, “No,” to the money, but appreciated her honesty.

Whether theft, robbery, larceny, or fraud, it’s all stealing. To steal is to take something that belongs to someone else, to seize control of it and to do with it what you want, not what the rightful owner wants. The Eighth Commandment simply forbids stealing. Sneaky or violent, clever or blundering, small-scale or large, one time or ongoing — it’s all wrong!

**But the Eighth Commandment has more in view than out and out stealing.** Take the story of Joseph, a story of stealing if there ever was one. That’s how Joseph himself saw it. “I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews” — that’s how Joseph told the story (Genesis 45:15). He was right too.

Initially his brothers plotted to kill him, but there was no profit in that. So they sold him into slavery. Then they were good and rid of him, and they had some money to show for it too. They had stolen from Joseph. They stole his freedom. They stole his ability to make a life for himself. They left him with nothing, left him to the mercy of circumstance and fate.

According to Old Testament law, someone who stole property or money had to make restitution. But someone who stole a person for profit . . . that was a crime punishable by death! (Exodus 21:16).

This concern is evident on a smaller scale in Old Testament laws about making loans (e.g., Leviticus 25:33-38). If your neighbor is in need, the law said, you have to make a loan to him if you are able. And you must not charge interest. It’s wrong to make a profit from your neighbor’s need.

This is why there has been so much upset about payday lending. We’re told that payday loans are necessary — necessary for people who find themselves in real need, necessary for people who have nowhere else to go. But it’s precisely at those times of necessity that Old Testament law says, “Don’t charge interest!” Yet the fees and interest for payday loans — and despite the recently passed reform legislation, new tactics have the same net results — fees and interest for those loans are beyond excessive. It’s a bad business model, morally speaking. (We’re good at protesting, but I wonder if we would put our own energy and money into a moral alternative.) The problem, of course, is that, when people have very little resources with which to make a life, to take a chunk of that little bit for excessive fees and interest, that leaves people continually vulnerable to economic ruin.

Old Testament law forbade taking a millstone as collateral on a loan (Deuteronomy 24:6). Why? Without a millstone, how could a destitute family grind and eat what little grain they had? To make it more difficult for someone to live economically, that amounts to stealing. The Eighth Commandment says, “No!” to that.

**But the commandment says more than “No!” It also says, “Yes!”** Ephesians 4, for example, turns in the Eighth Commandment’s positive direction. “Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy” (v. 28).

The problem with a thief is that he wants something for nothing. He doesn’t want to work for what he intends to have. Or he doesn’t want to do honest work, let’s put it that way. Many thieves do work hard; it’s just not honest work. The first thing for a thief to do, according to the Apostle, if he wants to do what’s right, is to start doing honest work.

The Apostle talks about doing work with the hands. I don’t think that’s because he has any romantic notions about manual labor. Rather, I think he has in mind some kind of work other than the mental scheming by which the thief has plotted his thefts. “Quit scheming, and get to work!” That’s the point.

The Apostle grounds this turn in a positive, not a negative, way. He might have said, “Quit stealing; it’s immoral and hurtful.” He might have said, “Quit stealing; you’re stirring up God’s anger.” Instead he says, “Quit stealing, and get to work, so you can help people in need. Get to work, so you can do something positive, something constructive. Get to work, so you can do something for somebody other than yourself.”

This is not our usual way of thinking about work. We believe in work, honest work, hard work. Work is how you make a life for yourself and your loved ones. Work is how you make your way in the world; it’s how you get ahead. Work is how you put food on the table, a roof over your head, and money in the bank. Work is how you pay for the things that make life worth living.

For us work is about living, and work is about property. Our house, my car, your boat; my guitar, your horse, her shoes; his four-wheeler, our rental home, my books. And the list goes on. It’s our stuff; we earned it. We worked for it. We paid for it — or we’re paying for the loan.

The Apostle, on the other hand, says it’s not for ourselves that we work, but for others. I’m sure he doesn’t object to our putting food on the table and clothes on our backs. He may, however, object to our excesses. And few of us don’t have way more than we need! But the Apostle provides a different objective for honest work. “Work so you can help others,” he says, “so you can help people who are struggling to get by.” And he doesn’t include that as an afterthought, but as the natural outflow of honest work.

It’s almost as if he doesn’t think we’re entitled to take care of ourselves, to take very good care of ourselves, first. It’s almost as if he thinks what we have and what we earn somehow isn’t really ours. Where would he get an idea like that? From page after page of the Bible, of course. Everything we have, everything we earn belongs, not to us, but to God. And it is all to be used for godly purposes.

Not taking care of people in need, people who are struggling to get by, not helping as we are able, looking too much after ourselves, that’s a violation of the Eighth Commandment. It’s stealing. And this is no left-wing, twenty-first century spin on the Eighth Commandment or on the Apostle. The Heidelberg Catechism (from the sixteenth century!) says the Eighth Commandment requires “that I do whatever I can for my neighbor’s good” (A 111).

So, I don’t think the Eighth Commandment is simple — or obvious. And I don’t think I’ve done such a great job keeping it. I’m pretty good at the surface meaning; you probably are too. But under the surface, where the commandment calls me to take care of my neighbor . . . down there it’s probably like the waters around the Great Barrier Reef: a lot of it undiscovered and unexplored, with all sorts of creatures living there, some of them beautiful, and some of them just plain ugly.