

Commandments 8: Just Desserts

10/2/2022

Exodus 20:15 and Micah 6

When I was seven years old, my parents, my brothers, and I took a trip to Indianapolis and went to various museums while we were there. However, my most vivid memory from that trip wasn't of the museums but of what happened to my family one night. My parents got called out of the room, and they told my brothers to order a movie to the room. That was highly suspicious to me because at no other time did we ever do a pay-per-view movie on our family trips. I later found out that my parents' Suburban had been broken into in the parking lot right outside our window. The perps smashed in the window behind the driver seat and stole only two things before we suspect they were scared off. They took one walkie talkie but not the other, and they stole a Bible. I can remember thinking that we could just call them over the walkie talkie and ask them to give us our stuff back, and that made perfect sense to my seven-year-old mind. However, we know that makes as much sense as the robbers learning their lesson and finding God simply because they stole a Bible. Regardless, when we think about theft, we think about it in the case of what happened to my family: a house, car, or establishment is broken into, things are taken without permission, and not returned, but as it turns out, there's more to this commandment than just "theft" as we traditionally think of it.

Today's commandment does encompass theft of physical objects, but it goes beyond just that. The reading from Micah 6 today mentions "false weights and measures," methods used by bankers and merchants to swindle and scam people out of their hard-earned money. The same could be said about scams and other such fraudulent dealings in the modern day. In these cases, there's the stealing of money or other physical possessions not by holding someone at gunpoint or breaking into somewhere when no one else is around. Rather, the theft is a slight of hand, happening in open daylight by falsifying or confusing information, a topic for next week's sermon. However, as can be anticipated, it's not just the physical actions themselves that go against this commandment either.

Like we discussed with Cain and Abel a couple weeks ago, it's not just the actions themselves that are sinful, but the thoughts that lead up to those actions which are sinful. So, for example, envying the prosperity of another person has the potential of leading up to a robbery or other crimes, and therefore breaks this commandment because one has already stolen from the envied person in their mind. At the same rate, by envying another person and their success, one is placing greater value on earthly things than "treasures in heaven" as it were. Similarly, scheming is a violation of this commandment because it has the potential of leading to theft, swindling, and other crimes. Even thoughts of swindling break this commandment. However, this commandment goes further still to include the plotting and actual theft of not just physical objects but non-tangible items as well.

Now, what do I mean by that? While we generally think of "stealing" as taking away physical possessions of a person in some way or another, this commandment also includes the taking away of things like personal rights, freedoms, justice, and the like. For example, things like oppression that steal a person's freedom from them, that infringe upon their personal liberties, break this commandment. Murder, where you are robbing a person of their life and robbing their loved ones of potential milestones down the line or even income, is a form of theft. Bribery, blackmail, and extortion that infringe upon a person's liberties or that solicit their stealing from someone else or committing another crime also break this commandment. In light

of last week's reading, one could argue that in rape cases, while they fall under the adultery commandment more directly, they also indirectly fall under "theft" because the perpetrator is stealing a person's innocence. In all cases of theft, regardless of what's taken and how it's done, there is also a stealing of that person's sense of security and safety, a stealing from that person their sense of there being order to the world. Even still, with everything that I've mentioned this commandment covering, this rabbit hole of a commandment goes deeper yet, believe it or not.

One last layer of this commandment that we'll touch on has to do with preventing people from getting what is rightfully theirs. So, for example, the idleness of workers that prevents planting, harvesting, or production of any sort goes against this commandment. Similarly, squandering one's gifts for satisfying one's own greed or the not using of one's talents at all, as we see in the Parable of the Talents, also break this commandment because they prevent the work of the Lord from being accomplished. Great examples of this would be the religious elite in Jesus' day whom he refers to over and over again as "hypocrites." Even in the modern day, you have the politicians and celebrities that are elevated so highly in our society. You may be wondering how they are "robbers" and "thieves," and this is theft of yet a different sort. They are not trying to steal from God or us necessarily. However, if there is a mentality of "They can do no wrong" attached to them, then we have proof that we have been robbed of our ability to see the full picture. The glory only God deserves is being given instead to fellow humans who are masters of their craft, stealing from God righteousness, authority, and praise. They may not aim to do this, we may not aim to let it happen, but it is nonetheless theft per the definition of this commandment.

In short then, if one's words, thoughts, or actions take away what is someone else's, whether tangible or intangible, it breaks this commandment. If it prevents someone from getting what is rightfully theirs, not in the sense of seeking revenge but rather of just earnings, it is also a violation of this commandment. If one's thoughts or words would lead to either one's self or another person breaking this or another commandment, then those thoughts and words break this commandment. In place of such thoughts, words, and deeds, this commandment guides us in both our giving and receiving in our lives. In our receiving, we are to take only what is rightly ours, and we are to create and enter into business dealings that are just and truthful, whereby everyone receives only their fair share. In giving, we are to have a sense of modesty about the value we give worldly goods, services, and people. We are to give and borrow only what is within our abilities to give or repay, what is within ours or the other's needs, and what rightfully belongs to whomever it belongs. If we have, in fact, stolen anything from someone, be it tangible or nontangible, proper and fair restitution is to be paid.

You'll notice that both in regards to what we give and what we receive, both sides are limited by justice, by what is fair and right, where all persons are equal and all needs are met. Therefore, to tolerate or participate in injustice in its various forms is to steal from others what is rightfully theirs, but to do justice, that is to ensure equity and equality among all persons. So, I ask: how are you doing justice in your life?