

THOU SHALT NOT STEAL
Exodus 20:15, Matthew 12:1-2
By Raymond White

Exodus 20:15 Thou shalt not steal.

God sanctioned the private ownership of property when he wrote, “Thou shalt not steal.” Without ownership, stealing is a meaningless concept. You cannot steal what nobody owns. So, God allows ownership because he forbids stealing.

In addition to the general principle, the bible says much about different kinds of stealing.

[1] BURGLARY

Exodus 22:2 If a thief be found breaking up, and be smitten that he die, there shall no blood be shed for him. :3 If the sun be risen upon him, there shall be blood shed for him; for he should make full restitution; if he have nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft.

If you kill a night burglar, since at night you can't tell if the burglar means real malicious harm or not (maybe rape and murder) then you were in your right to kill him and it was the burglar's bad luck; he shouldn't have been prowling around at night. There were no questions asked. The police had better things to do than to arrest a man for killing a night burglar in self defense. That's why “there shall no blood be shed for him.”

But a day burglar was a slightly different thing. Maybe a day burglar wasn't so dangerous and killing him was more an act of murder rather than self defense and maybe killing that burglar is a capital crime. Or maybe not. In any case, it needed to be investigated. You can't just kill, for instance, a fleeing felon out of spite. After all, the law's job is to exact a proper restitution from the thief so don't be a vigilante.

All of this is police action, requiring government — in Israel's case, judges — to oversee the protecting of private ownership by catching thieves and punishing them.

[2] FINDERS KEEPERS

The law also deals with such things as, what I call, friendly embezzlement; that is, helping yourself to your friend's stuff just because you can. But it also makes clear that you're not responsible for your friend's stuff just because he left it at your house.

Exodus 22:7 If a man shall deliver unto his neighbor money or stuff to keep, and it be stolen out of the man's house; if the thief be found, let him pay double. :8 If the thief be not found, then the master of the house shall be brought unto the judges, to see whether he have put his hand unto his neighbour's good.

[3] MAN STEALING

Particularly serious — more serious than stealing stuff — is stealing people: kidnapping.

Deuteronomy 24:7 If a man be found stealing any of his brethren that thief shall die.

We can imagine the motives that bad people might have for stealing people. And slavery was, unfortunately, legal throughout much of world history. Romans grabbed whoever they wanted, as did Greeks, Persians, and so on. But in the Torah, man stealing was a capital crime. If Bible believing Europeans had understood that, perhaps the Atlantic slave trade might not have happened.

Then there's kidnapping for ransom, and kidnapping for political terrorism, and kidnapping for rape and sex-ploitation. All of those, according to God's law, are capital crimes.

[4] BORROWING

Now, there are some subtle variation of stealing.

Psalms 37:21 The wicked borroweth and payeth not again.

Some people file bankruptcy, not because they need to but because it's profitable to — a legal loophole to cheat creditors. When abused, bankruptcy is stealing made legal.

That's not to say that there isn't a right time for bankruptcy. Of course in modern law, which disavows slavery, bankruptcy is the means by which bankrupt people get to start over. And that's a good thing. It's "grace," in financial terms. I'm just saying that good laws intended to protect can be use by bad people to steal.

[5] EMPLOYERS

Deuteronomy 24:15 At his day thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor.

There are so many ways that a rich man can take advantage of a poor man, and it's not fair. This verse speaks of a poor day worker. He mows your lawn today so that he can feed his family tonight. But then the boss-man says, "Sorry, I only pay on Fridays. Come back then for your check." And this he does for a few pennies interest he makes holding onto the poor man's money while the poor man's family goes hungry all week.

God says that's not right, and it is the law's job, the judge's job, to make sure that doesn't happen. If the poor man earned it today, pay him today. Don't use technicalities to cheat him.

The problem today is that rich people can afford good attorneys but poor people cannot. So people are not so equal under the law as we suppose.

[6] MERCHANTS

Proverbs 11:1 A false balance is an abomination.

A false balance is how merchants cheat customers, where a one pound weight is really a pound and a smidgen, to exact an extra charge for goods or services not earned. How many false balances plague us today is impossible to count: undisclosed interest, hidden charges and fees,

fine print, double taxes, inflation by banks and government — our economy is infested with false balances. What we need is a double dose of just plain honesty.

[7] JESUS

We need to know what stealing is, but we also need to know what stealing isn't. And we can get a handle of that by first asking this question: Did Jesus steal? I will of course try to persuade you that he did not, but there is a verse that seems on the edge that might give some anti-Jesus people a cause to accuse him. And that is what we should deal with now.

Matthew 12:1 At that time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples went were an hungered, and began to pluck the ears of corn, and to eat.

Every now and then someone will try to use this verse to justify petty theft. "Well, Jesus and his disciples stole corn so why can't I use company supplies for personal use?"

This question deserves an answer, particularly since we believe that Jesus was sinless, *1 John 3:5 in him is no sin.*

So, what's going on here? Did Jesus and his disciples steal corn or not? They did not. First of all, if they had been guilty of theft, the Pharisees would have been the first to say so, looking for any occasion at all to accuse him. But they didn't accuse him of theft. What did they accuse him of?

Matthew 12:2 Thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.

The Pharisees accused them, not of stealing, but of harvesting on the Sabbath.

Exodus 34:21 Six days thou shalt work, but on the seventh day thou shalt rest: in earing time and in harvest thou shalt rest.

The Pharisees exaggerated that commandment to mean you can't even pick an ear of corn on the Sabbath. But they didn't accuse Jesus of stealing. And why is that? Because the law was quite clear what stealing was and what it wasn't.

Deuteronomy 23:24 When thou comest into thy neighbour's vineyard, then thou mayest eat grapes thy fill at thine own pleasure; but thou shalt not put any in thy vessel :25 When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbor, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbor's standing corn.

Back then, as now, travelers and poor people needed some things to be free. Today, as you travel, you can use a restroom at a gas station, or get a drink from a park fountain, or park safely for the night at a rest-stop. Using these free amenities is not stealing but sort of a social understanding.

Moses wrote just such an entitlement into the law. Farmers, according to the law, did have a social obligation to assist travelers and poor people. The rule was that anyone passing through a vineyard or field of standing corn was welcome to eat some grapes or pluck an ear or

two for a quick meal. Fair enough. A few grapes, a few ears would not be missed and were a great benefit to travelers — there were no fast food restaurants for a quick Big Mac.

But there were some rules, some very important restrictions.

First: Only *standing* corn. If you helped yourself to the barn, to the corn that was already harvested, that was stealing.

Second: You can eat only what you can pick with your hands (don't bring a "sickle") and eat there (don't fill a "vessel"). Like an all-you-can-eat, there's no take-out.

Sadly, generosity is so often met with greed that God needed to forbid taking advantage of generosity. But that's just the way things were, and are. So, while God provides an entitlement so travelers won't go hungry, he also limits that entitlement so farmers won't go hungry.

Perhaps we could better balance our entitlements today, with a bit more fairness and restraint. We taxpayers, after all, are burdened with a lot. There do seem to be a lot of "sickles" and "vessels" in our cornfields. Jesus did not walk away with arms loads of other people's corn. He was no thief. Today, people walk away with bunches of other people's stuff.