

We're making our way through the Ten Commandments and this morning we have come to the eighth Commandment which states, **"You shall not steal."** It's simple but it's amazing how creative people can be in breaking it.

Three college freshman and three college seniors were traveling home for Thanksgiving break. At the train station, the three freshmen bought tickets for themselves and watched as the seniors bought just one ticket.

One of the freshmen asked, "How are the three of you going to travel on only one ticket?" "Watch and learn," answered one of the seniors.

They all boarded the train. The three freshmen took their seats as all three seniors crammed into a bathroom together and closed the door. Shortly after the train departed, the conductor came around collecting tickets. He knocked on the bathroom door and said, "Ticket, please." The door opened just a crack and a single arm emerged with a ticket in hand. The conductor took it and moved on.

The freshmen observed and agreed it was a clever idea. They decided to do the same thing on the return trip and save some money. When they got to the train station a few days later, they bought a single ticket for the return trip. The seniors were also there, but they didn't buy a ticket at all. Perplexed, one of the freshmen asked, "How are you going to travel without a ticket?" "Watch and learn," answered a senior.

When they boarded the train, the three seniors crammed into one bathroom and the three freshmen crammed into another one across the aisle. Shortly after the train was on its way, one of the seniors left their bathroom and walked to the bathroom where the freshmen were hiding. He knocked on the door and said, "Ticket, please."

When it comes to the eighth Commandment, there is no end to the ways we can violate it.

In **Exodus 20:15**, God tells His people **"You shall not steal."** This is a straightforward commandment with only four words which simply means we don't take what doesn't belong to us. We don't withhold something that rightly belongs to another, and like most of the commandments that we have looked at – take murder and adultery for example, there might be the tendency to think that this commandment does not apply to any of us – because there are no thieves here, but as we have already seen with the previous commandments – don't be so sure.

To introduce this eighth Commandment, I want to take us way back into the Old Testament to **Joshua 7**. Now before we dive into this story, I need to set it up.

The Israelites, now led by Joshua, have just defeated the main Canaanite stronghold of Jericho. It was a huge victory for the Israelites, everything happened just like God said it would, they were full of confidence, and their great victory sent ripples and fear throughout the land. We are told in **Joshua 6:27**,

“So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land.”

That’s a very reassuring and powerful statement. That’s like **Romans 8:31** where the Apostle Paul says, *“If God is for us who can be against us.”* We are told the Lord was with Joshua, so after reading a passage like that, no one would expect the story that comes next. Let’s start with **verse 2**. We are told,

² Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth-aven, east of Bethel, and said to them, “Go up and spy out the land.” So the men went up and spied out Ai. ³ They returned to Joshua and said to him, “Do not let all the people go up; only about two or three thousand men need go up to Ai; do not make all the people toil up there, for they are few.”

After their great victory over Jericho, Joshua sent spies about 10 miles up a mountain pass to the northwest to check out the town of Ai. Ai looked like a small town compared to the city of Jericho – the spies didn’t even see a McDonalds or a Starbucks, and they returned and essentially told Joshua, *“We don’t need to send in the entire army this time. Let’s just send in the junior varsity. They got this.”*

Without consulting the Lord and seeking His guidance, without prayer, Joshua assumed that God was pleased with His people and would give them another victory, so Joshua gave the orders to go against the people of Ai. Surely, this is going to be a cake walk for the Israelites. Let’s continue with **verses 4 and 5**.

⁴ So about three thousand men from the people went up there, but they fled from the men of Ai. ⁵ The men of Ai struck down about thirty-six of their men, and pursued them from the gate as far as Shebarim and struck them down on the descent, so the hearts of the people melted and became as water.

Well, so much for the cake walk. What should have been an easy victory for the Israelites turned into a complete disaster, as they ran for their lives with their tails between their legs, losing 36 soldiers in the process.

How in the world could this have happened? They walked on the floor of the Red Sea, they crossed the Jordan River at flood stage, they defeated the mighty city of Jericho, but they are struck down by the men of Ai. How did this happen?

When word of this shocking defeat reached Joshua, this is how he responded beginning with **verse 6**.

⁶ Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the Lord until the evening, both he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads. ⁷ Joshua said, “Alas, O Lord God, why did You ever bring this people over the Jordan, only to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? If only we had been willing to dwell beyond the Jordan! ⁸ O Lord, what can I say since Israel has turned their back before their enemies? ⁹ For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and they will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. And what will You do for Your great name?”

Joshua is beside himself. He’s devastated. He’s humbled. Something had gone terribly wrong and now Joshua is second guessing himself as a leader, and he’s questioning and even blaming God.

O Lord God, why did You ever bring this people over the Jordan, only to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us?

He’s sounding like the unbelieving Jews at the Red Sea who saw the Egyptian army coming their way and said, “*Oh, if only we had stayed where we were in Egypt.*”

God had promised to be with them wherever they went, in fact, they had the Ark of the Covenant that reminded them of God’s presence in their midst, but based on this experience at Ai, for some unknown reason, it would seem on the surface that God was not present as He promised, and had changed His plans for His people. Let’s continue with **verse 10**, to see what’s really going on. We are told,

¹⁰ So the Lord said to Joshua, “Rise up! Why is it that you have fallen on your face? ¹¹ Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. And they have even taken some of the things under the ban and have both stolen and deceived. Moreover, they have also put them among their own things. ¹² Therefore the sons of Israel cannot stand before their enemies; they turn their backs before their enemies, for they have become

accursed. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy the things under the ban from your midst. ¹³ Rise up! Consecrate the people and say, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, for thus the Lord, the God of Israel, has said, “There are things under the ban in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you have removed the things under the ban from your midst.” ¹⁴ In the morning then you shall come near by your tribes. And it shall be that the tribe which the Lord takes by lot shall come near by families, and the family which the Lord takes shall come near by households, and the household which the Lord takes shall come near man by man. ¹⁵ It shall be that the one who is taken with the things under the ban shall be burned with fire, he and all that belongs to him, because he has transgressed the covenant of the Lord, and because he has committed a disgraceful thing in Israel.’”

Joshua had blamed God for the defeat, but he now learns the surprising truth – their defeat at Ai was the result of sin at Jericho. God hadn’t broken His promise. It wasn’t God’s fault they were defeated – it was their own.

Before their attack on Jericho, the Israelites were banned and warned not to take any of the loot and plunder for themselves. It was God’s will that they were to bring all precious metals to the treasury to be devoted to the Lord and everything else was to be burned, and of the thousands of soldiers involved in the attack on Jericho, only one man violated the ban, and the whole nation suffered the consequences. All of Israel suffered because God considered Israel as one people in the Lord, just as we are one body in Christ. We belong to each other, we need each other, and we affect each other, and just as the Apostle Paul would later say, *“If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.”*

So, God takes His people through this methodical investigative process that starts with the tribes, then whittles down to the clans, and then to the families. I suspect this long process prompted everyone to search their own hearts for sin, it would certainly impress on the people the seriousness of disobeying God, and it also served as a clear reminder to everybody that nothing is hidden from God. He sees it all.

Well, as the story continues, Achan, whose name means *“trouble”* is singled out and it’s revealed that he had taken a beautiful robe, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold from Jericho after he had clearly been warned not to. During the long investigative process, Achan could have come forward to confess his sin and maybe received a pardon, but he did not. It was only when Achan was exposed that he confessed to the theft, and as punishment, Achan, his sons and

daughters, his cattle, his donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had was destroyed. We can only conclude by this that the family had also been aware of Achan's sin and most likely assisted him in hiding the loot.

So, Achan wanted more, and he took what did not belong to him. He valued wealth more than His commitment to the Lord. He stole things that had been dedicated and devoted to God, and then he tried to cover it up, but his sin was exposed for all to see, and tragically, he and several others paid for his sin with their very lives. Achan violated the eighth Commandment.

There is an old mountain saying in North Carolina that goes like this, "*What's in the well comes up in the bucket*" and that means, that whatever is in a person's heart, will eventually come out in their words and in their actions – and that most definitely applies to the eighth Commandment, and to explore this truth a little further – as I have done in previous messages, I want to take us once more to the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with **Matthew 6:24**, where Jesus says,

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Jesus says that no one can serve two masters, and just for clarification, having two masters is not like working two jobs. What Jesus had in mind here was the master and slave relationship, and in that context, no slave could have two masters for each master would claim the slave as his property. You can only have one master, and in His teaching, Jesus identified two who are competing to be the one – the one you love, the one you are devoted to, the one you desire – that being ***God and wealth.***

The Greek word for wealth is "*mammon*" which refers to money and property and possessions. God and wealth are competing to be your master, and they going in two different directions. God commands us to walk by faith – to trust Him to provide, whereas wealth tempts us to walk by sight and to trust in the accumulation of more stuff. God calls us to set our minds on His kingdom and the things above which are eternal, but wealth leads us to set our minds on the things below – on things of this earth which will fade away. God and wealth are competing for us, and Jesus tells us that we will love one and hate the other. We will be devoted to one and despise the other. We cannot serve both God and wealth.

Isn't that a strange contrast made by Jesus? ***You cannot serve God and wealth.*** Think about that for a moment. ***Why didn't Jesus say you cannot serve not God***

and Satan? Or why didn't He say you can't serve God and yourself? That seems more reasonable to me, it surely sounds more spiritual, but no – you cannot serve God and wealth, and here's why.

Let's back up a bit to **Matthew 6:19-21**, where Jesus says,

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; ²¹ for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Did you catch that last piece? For where your treasure is, that's where your heart will be, or to say in another way, your heart will go in the direction of that which you cherish the most. For Jesus, the issue is your heart. This is a competition for your heart, for your love, for your devotion, and wealth appears to be God's main competitor for your heart.

Now, just for clarification, it's not wrong to have wealth. There are good godly people who have a lot of wealth. Wealth is not the problem, the problem is the love of wealth, a heart devoted to wealth, a passion for wealth, a craving for wealth, for when that happens, it no longer becomes a case where we have wealth – rather wealth will have us. It will control us, it will drive us, it will master us, and we will serve it. Our hearts will no longer be focused on God and the things above, instead our hearts will be focused on this earth and the excessive desire for more – which describes **greed**.

I think that's the root problem behind the eighth Commandment – greed – the selfish desire for more with little to no regard for others. Essentially, it's possessions over people, and its greed that says “*What's yours is mine and I will take it,*” and its greed that also says, “*What's mine is mine and I will keep it.*”

Greed is always self-centered, it's never satisfied, it's always hungry for more, and ultimately, it will cost you more than you know.

Do you know how an Eskimo catches a wolf? *The Eskimo coats his knife blade with animal blood and allows it to freeze. He then adds layer upon layer of blood, until the frozen blood completely conceals the blade. The hunter next fixes the knife in the ground with the blade up. A wolf smells the blood and when he discovers the bait he licks it, tasting the frozen blood. He licks faster, more and more vigorously, lapping the blade until the keen edge is bare. Feverishly now, harder and harder,*

the wolf licks the blade in the arctic night. In his mad craving for blood, he does not notice the razor-sharp sting of the naked blade on his tongue, nor does he recognize the moment when his insatiable thirst begins to be satisfied by his own warm blood. His carnivorous appetite just craves more—until the dawn finds him dead in the snow.

That's the problem with greed – it's never satisfied and it will cost you more than you know, and more importantly, it leads you to live your life as if God doesn't matter and can't be trusted.

When God told His people, **“You shall not steal,”** He did so as their Provider, and to keep this Commandment is to recognize that ultimately everything belongs to God, He owns it all, and we can trust Him to meet our needs.

The Apostle Paul tells us in **Ephesians 4:28,**

He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.

This passage tells us there are three ways to gain wealth – work hard for it, have it given to you, or steal it, and we already know that stealing is wrong.

In this verse, Paul also gives us the purpose for wealth with the words **“so that.”** We gain wealth so that we can share it with those in need. The greater purpose for wealth is generosity, and generosity is the complete opposite of greed. Sharing is the opposite of stealing, and Paul is telling us that the best way to cure greed and to battle our desire to *take* and to *keep* is to *give*. We are to be *givers* not *takers* which is consistent with the nature of God who freely gives to us.

Generosity is a way we follow the example of Christ and it's a way to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and if generosity is too hard for you, then you are holding too tight to the things of this world – things what will not last.

And one last thing I want to say. Generosity is not God's way of raising money, rather it's God way of raising His children who have their hearts set toward Him and their focus on His kingdom and the things above.

George W. Truett, a well-known pastor, was invited to dinner in the home of a very wealthy man in Texas. After the meal, the host led him to a place where they could

get a good view of the surrounding area.

Pointing to the oil wells punctuating the landscape, he boasted, “Twenty-five years ago I had nothing. Now, as far as you can see, it’s all mine.” Looking in the opposite direction at his sprawling fields of grain, he said, “That’s all mine.” Turning east toward huge herds of cattle, he bragged, “They’re all mine.” Then pointing to the west and a beautiful forest, he exclaimed, “That too is all mine.”

He paused, expecting Dr. Truett to compliment him on his great success. Truett, however, placing one hand on the man’s shoulder and pointing heavenward with the other, simply said, “How much do you have in that direction?”

The man hung his head and confessed, “I never thought of that.”

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