

Exodus 20:15 Property, properly

Let me take you back to later on Wednesday evening this week, when a certain football match was played. Since I'm sure you know by now that England are playing in the **Euros final** this evening, it's fairly clear that they must have beaten **Denmark** in the **semi-final** on Wednesday. For once it wasn't decided by **penalties** ... but the 2-1 scoreline was decided by a controversial penalty decision. Discussion is still raging as to whether the referee was right to have awarded England that crucial penalty.

A penalty was awarded and the decision stood following a video review. Harry Kane's spot-kick was saved but he put in the rebound for the winning goal. However, Sterling's penalty was marred in controversy and his alleged dive in the box was far from the only dodgy aspect of England's penalty.

Denmark were furious at the award of England's penalty but that wasn't the only controversial call. Denmark manager Kasper Hjulmand admitted he feels "bitter" after his side's Euro 2020 fairytale was ended by a controversial England penalty. ... "It was a penalty which should not have been a penalty," Hjulmand said.

That's a polite way of saying it. I don't know what it would be in Danish, but I suspect if it was England on the wrong end of such a decision, then the papers would be full of **We Was Robbed!**

And that of course makes obvious right at the start of this talk that we all know there is more to this verse

"You shall not steal."

(Exodus 20:15)

than property alone. If *we was robbed*, what was we robbed of? What was properly mine or ours that I or we have been improperly deprived of? What has been stolen? If it's **Wimbledon**, and a **line call** goes the wrong way, you can maybe quantify the loss in terms of prize money ... but what would the nation have really lost if the England penalty hadn't been given ... and the match perhaps subsequently decided after extra time by those dreaded sets of penalty kicks?

So when we're talking today about that 8th Commandment

"You shall not steal."

(Exodus 20:15)

we will need to think in broader terms than merely physical possessions, the kind of thing that a **burglar** can make off with in the middle of the night. And we must not just think in terms of what a burglar could do to us, but consider what we

ourselves might do, that this commandment speaks out against. Is there some way in which *we* might be guilty of theft, too?

And once again, remember this block of ten Words, or Commandments, isn't just an arbitrary set of rules imposed out of the blue on this nation that God has rescued from slavery in Egypt. There is more to it than that. God does not just rescue his people. He now wants to live among them. That's true over in the NT, too.

In [Christ] you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

(Ephesians 2:22)

This isn't a phase, some kind of temporary response to help us through life on this earth, just this side of eventual glory. Not at all. It's a preview and a taster of what is to come.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

(Revelation 21:3)

So even back in Exodus, all those centuries back, those rules that God gives for his people's life are meant to pave the way into relationship with him.

"And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God."

(Exodus 29:46)

And if honour for God is the theme of the earlier commandments, we're now moving onto commandments which deal with honour for our neighbours. Jesus, as ever, sums it up so helpfully and memorably and applicably, with what is sometimes called the "Golden Rule".

"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

(Matthew 7:12)

So we understand about possessions, in general terms. We might not always be correct concerning what we feel about what is *ours* ... but we know how we would feel if someone were to seek to *deprive* us of our possessions. In which case ... simple, isn't it?

"You shall not steal."

(Exodus 20:15)

What *doesn't* it ban?

Don't be limited by the literal
Flip it over

- **What *doesn't* it ban?**

Actually, I got myself stuck in a bit of a corner with this one. With the two previous commandments, there were some things that needed clarifying, if you remember.

So with the commandment about murder - which we might commonly just think of as "Do not kill" - we needed to briefly think through whether that includes a ban on killing animals for food, and a few other points.

And with the commandment about adultery, which we looked at last time, I thought I needed to spend a moment just countering the idea that Christians think sex is kind of spiritually dirty - obviously necessary, but to be minimised and played down as far as possible.

But today ... the more I've thought about it, the more this commandment seems to me to broaden out, to be applicably spiritually in a vast range of circumstances - which we'll come to in a moment. So what provisos are there that we just need to note before plunging into that?

The only thing that comes to mind - but I think it is a significant one, so I'm not mentioning this just for the sake of re-using my sermon headings - is the concept of property and possessions, as if simply *owning* a lot of stuff is somehow spiritually questionable.

So if you go back a few years, when the Marxists and Anarchists were trendy things to be, I can remember the nasty little slogan, **Property is Theft**.

Now of course you could point out that the claim is self-contradictory - you can't have theft if there is no such thing as property that can be thieved, in the first place. And maybe that is precisely why this slogan has stuck so effectively in my mind.

Or you could tackle that slogan pragmatically. If it's saying - as I think it probably is, along the Marxist lines - that actually everything belongs to everybody ... and that reduces in practice to the *State* owning everything (on behalf of the working classes) ... and then that reduces in practice (as in **Animal Farm**) to just a few leaders of the State controlling everything (on behalf of the State, on behalf of the working classes) ... which is actually the same kind of set-up that the Revolution was supposed to overthrow.

Although, by the time I have explained it like that, most of the activists have gone on to spout their slogan over somebody else, and I've nearly put *you* to sleep.

But for a while it seemed similarly trendy among some Christians to think that we were vaguely obliged to follow a similar model, because of what we read in the book of Acts. Newly converted, overflowing with enthusiasm ...

And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

(Acts 2:44)

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

(Acts 4:32)

So is this saying that “property is theft”? Are we called and required to live like this too? If we’re not going to allow this example to challenge us, could it be that we *are* just too tied to the things of this world? I think the question has to be asked. If we *don’t* ask it when we read this, shouldn’t we be concerned that our hearts are maybe getting cold and self-centred?

But though I have called this an example, I don’t think it’s an example that all of us have to follow. Even if something is *good*, it doesn’t mean that everyone has to follow and do the precisely same kind of *good* ... if other things are good, too.

So this is a wonderful, challenging example of love in action. Yes it is. But it doesn’t make property theft. Property rights - and responsibilities! - were clearly recognised in those days of the early church.

If you turn over a page to Acts 5, you see another example - but one to be avoided. A couple sold a piece of land - the same as everyone else seemed to be doing - and gave some (but only some) of the proceeds to the common purse. But they misled people. They gave the impression that they were giving away the *whole* proceeds of the sale, but they kept some back for themselves.

And the problem with that was not the only giving part of the proceeds, but the deceit. The couple are challenged by Peter about this. And he clearly says that they were not obliged to sell anything, or to give it all if they did. The problem was the lie.

“While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.”

(Acts 5:4)

Actually, here’s *another* good thing to do with your possessions: use them for the sake of the Kingdom of God. In an age before there was much in the way of church buildings, if someone had a big house they were prepared to open ...

Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

(Colossians 4:15)

So no, property is *not* theft. Be assured of that. But also remember the introduction to Jesus' parable of the Rich Fool:

And he said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

(Luke 12:15)

Covetousness we must return to in a couple of weeks. Now it's time to move on, and start thinking broadly.

- **Don't be limited by the literal**

"You shall not steal."

(Exodus 20:15)

There's a fair amount of obvious literal stuff that we could cover. Some of that is listed in Scripture. Reading on in Exodus, for example:

"If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep."

(Exodus 22:1)

(Fourfold ... Zacchaeus?) The word usually means to do something along those lines secretly or deceitfully - though just once with an entirely positive meaning, when young king Joash was rescued from assassination:

But Jehosheba, the daughter of King Joram, sister of Ahaziah, took Joash the son of Ahaziah and stole him away from among the king's sons who were being put to death, and she put him and his nurse in a bedroom. Thus they hid him from Athaliah, so that he was not put to death.

(2 Kings 11:2)

But generally speaking, there's a whole breadth of meaning here, from the most literal theft up to kidnapping - modern-day application here to "people-trafficking":

"Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death."

(Exodus 21:16)

Slavery, as allowed by the Law in Israel, was more like an agreed transaction - a desperate measure in response to a desperate plight, and regulated by legal rights of "redemption", being bought back from slavery, and automatic release in the year of Jubilee - but this is something different. A slaver does not steal *from* the person, but takes *the person*.

And aren't there other things that can be taken from a person that are not so easily quantifiable? What about honour and reputation? We can speak about "character assassination" - sounds more like murder, but you could see it as a kind of theft, too.

And what do you make of Absalom's sly campaign to oust his father David from the throne of Israel? That *steal* word is how the Bible sums it up:

And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate. And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, "From what city are you?"

And when he said, "Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel," Absalom would say to him, "See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you."

Then Absalom would say, "Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice."

And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him.

Thus Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgement. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

(2 Samuel 15:2-6)

Isn't that a fair use of the word *steal* there? In preparation for a *coup*, Absalom insinuates himself into a position of respect by carefully-chosen misrepresentations and manipulations.

And it strikes me that several of these Commandments could be re-framed in terms of theft, too.

"You shall not commit adultery."

(Exodus 20:14)

Isn't that stealing intimacy that is designed for one person only? Taking something that is not yours, and belongs to someone else.

"You shall not murder."

(Exodus 20:13)

Couldn't we see that as the theft of someone's life?

"Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."

(Exodus 20:12)

If you withhold something that is due, how does that differ from theft? The end result is the same: you have prevented someone from enjoying what is legitimately theirs. Why would the word "stealing" *not* be appropriate there?

And we can work our way back up through the Commandments in this way too. It's possible to deprive God of what he is due. Do you remember Psalms 29 and 96 picking up these words from 2 Chronicles?

Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him! Worship the LORD in the splendour of holiness;

...

(1 Chronicles 16:28-29)

And God does not shrink back from laying a charge of theft. Here is something due which is not being duly given:

“A son honours his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honour? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ ...”

(Malachi 1:6)

In the rest of Malachi chapter 1, it is as if God takes those priests to court, proving a dereliction of duty which amounts to theft. Read on in the same book, and you get even more explicit mention of theft:

“Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.”

(Malachi 3:8)

It all fits, doesn't it, with Jesus' profound summary of those OT laws in this one:

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

(Mark 12:30)

To *not* do this is spiritual theft: withholding from God what is his due.

And to *not* do this we should also think about in terms of spiritual adultery, too. That's precisely the picture that the OT prophets were very free to use - sometimes in almost rather crude terms - in describing what happened when the people of God started worshipping some other god instead or as well. Here's a more polite verse from Jeremiah 3 about this. Check out that passage in full, and you will see that Jeremiah didn't pull any punches in his explicit denunciations!

“Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the LORD your God and scattered your favours among foreigners under every green tree, and that you have not obeyed my voice, declares the LORD.”

(Jeremiah 3:13)

Folks, that verse that I put up a moment ago, Jesus reciting the Jewish *shema*, I have put up a good few times at our guest services.

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

(Mark 12:30)

It seems to me an overwhelming argument to use when people claim that they can be good enough for God - and therefore, by implication, claim that they don't need Jesus Christ as their saviour. Yes, I agree - ironically - keep this, and you will live. Just live like this, with this total devotion, with this absolute commitment in every aspect of your being, and you'll be just fine.

How well that goes down with an unbeliever, I don't really know. But every time I read it, it reminds me of how much I need Jesus. I do not - I still *cannot* - love God with this kind of intensity. I still listen to other voices within me insisting on a less God-centred understanding of the world around me, seducing my heart and corrupting my actions. So as well as defaulting on that first Commandment:

“You shall have no other gods before me.”

(Exodus 20:3)

I also have to admit that I am a spiritual adulterer and a spiritual thief. And if it were not for the grace of God, I would be even more a spiritual murderer too. I don't mean just in terms of hatred or anger - though of course I stand convicted of those, too. But I also have to include that, but for the grace of God, I would be a spiritual *self*-murderer too. Despite God pleading with me,

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, ...”

(Deuteronomy 30:19)

without his Spirit opening my eyes and my heart, I would have continued to choose death. These Commandments, remember, are spoken to people who have already been redeemed.

And God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. “You shall ...”

(Exodus 20:1-3)

These words tell me how we should now live, in the light of that new relationship. But they are a reminder, too, that we *don't*, yet. We still need the light of the Holy Spirit, shining out of the Word of God, to disclose the spiritual **plaque** growing on our spiritual teeth, that needs to be washed away once more with the blood of Jesus Christ.

So let's take a moment to think these things through.

Are there things that I have misappropriated, over the years? Fares dodged, tills by-passed, obligations or promises ignored? Things that could and should have been repaid ... but haven't been?

Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed. Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

(Romans 13:7-8)

Are there debts of honour that I have ignored? Do I owe someone forgiveness, because they have repented from their offence against me?

Have I neglected to give *God* his due? Have I turned a deaf ear to his word? Have I thought to take Christ as my Saviour, but still argue in my heart that "We do not want this man to rule over us"? Have I sought to determine the course of my own life - with all the worries and griefs that will give me - but refused to "humble yourself beneath the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you"?

At times I think the words of that Anglican Prayer of General Confession are worth including and repeating here. You might want to say them along with me, if you, too, finding God's truth uncomfortably scanning your souls, conclude you are also a spiritual murderer, adulterer, thief or more.

ALMIGHTY God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men: We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we from time to time most grievously have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; The burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; For thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, Forgive us all that is past; And grant that we may ever hereafter Serve and please thee In newness of life, To the honour and glory of thy Name; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Before I finish, though, with this Commandment, too, I want to

- **Flip it over**

Because in the Gospel there is hope. In *Jesus* there is hope. There is explicit hope in the scene of his crucifixion.

Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.

(Matthew 27:38)

And one of those turned in that most unlikely of circumstances, crazed by pain, stupefied by the drugged sour wine, called out to Jesus, and was saved.

We're told that various lifestyles are incompatible with the Kingdom of God:

... nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

(1 Corinthians 6:10)

But following on the heels of that stern warning is a message of hope. Not "you can change", but you can *be changed*. God can step into your life and give you a fresh start. Note what might be the most glorious set of past tenses in the whole of Scripture: such *were*.

And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

(1 Corinthians 6:11)

See how that change can take hold in a person's life.

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

(Ephesians 4:28)

Instead of being forever on the take, you can become a generous giver - just like the God you now follow and worship.

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

(1 Timothy 6:17-19)

Precisely how that generous spirit will manifest itself, that's between you and your Lord. But can we recapture the spirit that characterised those early disciples that we encountered back at the start?

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

(Acts 2:46-47)

Folks, instead of stealing, let us be glad for God's gracious gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Saviour. And let *us* be the children of God: let *us* learn now to be generous in all sorts of ways, in the name of Jesus.