

## THE LORD'S SUPPER: EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

**Exodus 20:15** (NASB): "You shall not steal."

### INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s, a girl enrolled in a high school Values Clarification class in Teaneck, New Jersey. During the semester, she told her teacher she found a purse containing \$1000 and returned it to its owner. The teacher asked the class for their reaction. Every single one of her fellow students concluded the girl had been "foolish." Most insisted if anyone is that careless they should be punished. When the teacher was asked what he said to the students, he responded, "Well, of course, I didn't say anything. If I come from the position of what is right and what is wrong, then I'm not their counselor. I can't impose my views."

Moral anarchy, which blurs most clear distinctions between right and wrong and resents anyone who dares to say what other people are doing is wrong, is rapidly taking over our nation. The worst crime, according to many people's thinking today, is being caught doing something against the rules. Otherwise, they think it isn't wrong. Stealing is a good example. What is known as "inventory shrinkage" has reached epidemic levels in the U. S, totaling nearly \$49 billion in 2016. This is not due to a struggling job market or sluggish retail sales. The three chief causes of such "inventory shrinkage" are shoplifting, employee theft, and return fraud. As an example of "return fraud," I recently read about a man who boasts of not paying for a car battery for many years. Costco offers a 36-month, full replacement warranty on every vehicle battery. This man returns his battery about every 34 months, stating it has failed. Costco always gives him a new battery without checking the battery he returns.

In 1980, with a U. S. population of 227 million (compared to 325 million today), retailers lost \$3 billion to shoplifters. Had this rate remained constant, stores would have lost \$5 billion to shoplifters in 2016. But thieves stole nearly \$18 billion (18,000 million) in merchandise! The U. S. Chamber of Commerce estimates 1/50 shoppers are now guilty of shoplifting. This rate is three times higher in grocery stores, meaning 1/17 shoppers are helping themselves to items without paying for them. What's surprising is that only 10% of all shoplifters come from low income backgrounds; 70% are middle class and 20% are classified as wealthy. There are over 140 million incidents of shoplifting every year in America! Contrast this with an apple orchard near Wabash, IN, where the influence of Christianity remains stronger. If no one is minding the store, patrons are trusted to leave the money in the open cashbox for the apples they bag.

Nearly another \$15 billion of "inventory shrinkage" in 2016 was due to employee theft. Businesses are so overwhelmed by acts of thievery they often no longer prosecute smaller thefts, which has led to the increase to nearly \$800 for each reported act of shoplifting, up from \$377 just two years ago! One study called shoplifting and employee theft "the most prevalent and (aside from organized crime) most costly crimes against business and society." And only 1/35 shoplifters are ever caught. Such thefts drive up the cost and availability of merchandise, which means each thief is actually robbing from their neighbors and fellow citizens, not just from businesses. Another \$458 billion is annually stolen from our U. S. Government, on average, via income tax evasion. One of the most common ways is claiming large charitable contributions that were never made. A 1983 audit of 4000 California returns claiming large charitable contributions found the vast majority of those filing the returns were found to be cheating. On average, they owed \$5,800 in additional taxes. Today, tax evasion has become not just sickness but an epidemic; no longer kept secret but widely admitted; even joked about and accepted.

One man has compiled a list of 138 synonyms for "stealing". They include: "cheat, defraud, embezzle, loot, make off with, misappropriate, pilfer, plagiarize, ransack, rip off, shoplift, swindle, swipe, and thief." If we pooled our minds this morning, we could probably come up with more than 138 ways we've seen people "cheat, loot, rip off, and thief." A coworker, a security guard for a large company, regularly took

home a fistful of large trash bags from the janitor's closet each fall to use when raking up leaves at his home. A man with his auto repair shop next to my Dad's store told me he got his mechanic tools from the grain mill where he worked for years. A high school girl in a church youth department said her "Christian," church-going-every-Sunday-mom taught her how to sneak into a second movie to watch it free after paying for the first movie they watched. A person pays for a buffet at a restaurant and then scrapes off much from a plate onto the plate of another person who paid only for a single menu item. Is this stealing? Is it stealing when we are on company time and habitually show up late, leave early, or spend much of the company's time doing everything but company business? A certain company put up this notice one day: "To all employees: Due to increased competition and a desire to stay in business, we find it necessary to institute a new policy. We are asking that somewhere between starting and quitting time, and without infringing too much on the time usually devoted to Lunch Periods, Coffee Breaks, Rest Periods, Story Telling, Ticket Selling, Vacation Planning, and the rehashing of yesterday's TV programs, each employee endeavor to find some time that can be set aside and known as the 'Work Break.'"

Today we are gratefully honoring the sacrificial death of our Lord **Jesus Christ** in our behalf by our observance of the Lord's Supper. **I Corinthians 11:27-28** (NCV) tells us, "So a person who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in a way that is not worthy of it will be guilty of sinning against the body and the blood of the Lord.<sup>28</sup> Look into your own hearts before you eat the bread and drink the cup." Martin Luther (1483-1546) took such words to heart. He taught upon one of the Ten Commandments prior to leading his church in partaking of the Lord's Supper. **I Corinthians 11:17** (TLB) explains why taking stock of our heart's obedience to Christ prior to participation in His Supper is healthy practice: "For if he eats the bread and drinks from the cup unworthily, not thinking about the body of Christ and what it means, he is eating and drinking God's judgment upon himself; for he is trifling with the death of Christ." To help us prepare for the Lord's Supper, let's focus for a few minutes on,

## HOW GOD LOOKS AT STEALING

God often reveals His concern over how we treat others, as in **Leviticus 19:13-19** (NIV): "Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. . . .<sup>16</sup>Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. . . .<sup>18</sup>Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." By His command, "You shall not steal," God expresses His concern over how we treat other people's property. Brief and to the point, it covers a multitude of offenses, including stealing property, stealing a person's good name (slander), or cheating on a test (which involves wrongfully seizing a better grade than we earned). This command prohibits not only the secret or open removal of another person's property, but injury done to it through carelessness or indifference, or fraudulent retention of what rightfully belongs to others (**Exodus 21:33; Exodus 22:13; Exodus 23:4-5; Deuteronomy 22:1-4**). Two men, a Jew and a Christian, were engaging in a friendly argument about their respective faiths. "Most of the good things you Christians have, you've taken from us," the Jew said. "The Ten Commandments, for instance." "I'll admit we took the Ten Commandments from you," answered the Christian, "but you can't say that we've kept them."

There's an unusual passage found in **Zechariah 5:1-4** (NCV), of all places, that magnifies for our eyes how much our Heavenly Father detests stealing: "I looked up again and saw a flying scroll.<sup>2</sup> The angel asked me, 'What do you see?' I answered, 'I see a flying scroll, thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide.'<sup>3</sup> And he said to me, This is the curse that will go all over the land. One side says every thief will be taken away. The other side says everyone who makes false promises will be taken away.<sup>4</sup> The LORD All-Powerful says, 'I will send it to the houses of thieves and to those who use My name to make false promises. The scroll will stay in that person's house and destroy it with its wood and stones.'"" In other words, God threatens to obliterate, to remove even from memory, all whose lives are infested with stealing or who defraud others with false promises of good things that are never delivered.

**Exodus 22:3b-4** (NLT), which God declared to Israel soon after the Ten Commandments, describes the drastic penalties God placed upon stealing: "A thief who is caught must pay in full for everything he stole. If he cannot pay, he must be sold as a slave to pay for his theft. <sup>4</sup> If someone steals an ox or a donkey or a sheep and it is found in the thief's possession, then the thief must pay double the value of the stolen animal." **Ephesians 4:28** updates on this issue of stealing what God expects of those who profess to follow **Jesus** as Savior and Lord: "The thief must no longer steal. Instead, he must do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need." God here identifies three ways one may get wealth: work for it, have it given to you, or steal it. Stealing is what God condemns. A man told his wife to fire the maid. He said he'd caught her stealing their bath towels. His wife asked, "Which towels did she take?" He answered, "The ones we got on vacation from that Holiday Inn!" Is stealing only stealing when something is taken from us; not when we help ourselves to what is not rightfully ours? A Sunday School teacher teaching on the 8th Commandment was trying to illustrate that it's wrong to steal. "All right children, here's another example," she said. "If I were to pull a man's wallet out of his pocket and take all the money in it, what would I be?" Little Joey's hand shot up, "I know, I know," he said. "All right Joey," the teacher said, "What would I be?" With a confident smile Joey said, "You'd be his wife."

In 2009, Loretta and I were privileged to visit Monticello, the home built by Thomas Jefferson, our 3<sup>rd</sup> President. While waiting in line to purchase tickets, I picked up an official Monticello Guidebook retailing for \$12.95. While paying for admission, I innocently placed it among my personal items. It was not until we were walking to our car that I realized my mistake. I quickly went back to the entrance but the doors had been secured early due to politicians from Washington, D. C., scheduled to arrive soon. When we returned to our Tucson home, I called Monticello's Gift Shop, explained my mistake, and told the clerk of my desire, "as a Christian," to pay for it. She said, "This is truly rare. Few would do this." We don't like it when we are overcharged for something and may go to great lengths to get back what was wrongly taken from us. Should we be as zealous to give back what we wrongfully gain? At age 19, I took a job as a clerk in a Tucson drug store. One night, I realized too late I'd mistakenly put in the bag the \$10 bill a man had given me to pay for an item. He was long gone. Because I'd given him change, he actually went home richer than he came. I'd recently given my heart to **Jesus** and felt a responsibility to Him and to the store, so I took money from my wallet (equivalent to \$63 today) and put it in the cash register. Imagine my relief when he returned to the store a half hour later returning this \$10. He smiled kindly at me while saying he knew it had been a mistake. Whether or not he was a Christian, his honesty was Christlike!

## CONCLUSION

A young man with our Southern Baptist Convention Sunday School Board was asked to preach at the last minute at a Nashville church. He selected, "You shall not steal" (**Exodus 20:15**) as his text. The next morning, when he caught a bus to work, he received too much change from the bus driver. His first thought was, "The bus company will never miss it and I could use it." His conscience quickly convicted him, though, that it betrayed **Jesus** to keep it. When he handed it back to the driver, he learned the driver had done it on purpose. He'd heard the young man's sermon the day before. He'd watched him in his mirror as he'd counted the change and realized he'd been given too much. Had he kept it, the bus driver told him, "I would never again have had any confidence in preaching." He would have walked away from Christianity as meaningless!

**Philippians 2:12-13, 15b** (NLT): "Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. <sup>13</sup> For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases Him. <sup>15</sup> Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people."