

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sticky Fingers

You shall not steal ~Exodus 20:15.

INTRODUCTION

We are all, no doubt, aware of “stealing”, either having done it or having had it done to us; consequently, we are very familiar with what stealing is.

To take or appropriate without right or leave and with intent to keep or make use of wrongfully~Miriam Webster.

We are also no doubt very familiar with the natural side of this Law and perhaps take pride in the fact that we are not guilty of breaking this Command. We may chuckle at the tongue in cheek way Mark Twain recounts his exploits of stealing. We even make up cute sayings for the act, like, “sticky fingers” or “caught with his hand in the cookie jar.” But, when all is said and done, stealing by any other name, is still stealing.

When I was a boy, I was walking along a street and happened to spy a cart full of watermelons. I was fond of watermelon, so I sneaked quietly up to the cart and snatched one. Then I ran into a nearby alley and sank my teeth into the melon. No sooner had I done so, however, than a strange feeling came over me. Without a moment's hesitation, I made my decision. I walked back to the cart, replaced the melon—and took a ripe one.¹ ~Mark Twain

We smile at that apt description of a young boy's antics. While we may not have *sticky fingers* or have been *caught with our hand in the cookie jar*, just our use of those terms shows a breakdown in our thinking and acceptance of stealing. Stealing is stealing, whether guilty of breaking this Law in the way Mark Twain just described; or, those who steal for a living. Granted, there is a distinction between stealing bread in order to sustain life and stealing for personal gain.

One winter's night in 1935, it is said, Fiorello LaGuardia, the irrepressible mayor of New York, showed up at a night court in the poorest ward of the city. He dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench. That night a tattered old woman, charged with stealing a loaf of bread, was brought before him. She defended herself by saying, "My daughter's husband has deserted her. She is sick, and her children are starving."

The shopkeeper refused to drop the charges, saying, "It's a bad neighborhood, your honor, and she's got to be punished to teach other people a lesson." LaGuardia

¹ Hewett, James S.; Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988) p. 287.

sighed. He turned to the old woman and said, "I've got to punish you; the law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail."

However, even while pronouncing sentence, LaGuardia reached into his pocket, took out a ten-dollar bill, and threw it into his hat with these famous words: "Here's the ten-dollar fine, which I now remit, and furthermore, I'm going to fine everyone in the courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

The following day, a New York newspaper reported: "Forty-seven dollars and fifty cents was turned over to a bewildered old grandmother who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren. Making forced donations were a red-faced storekeeper, seventy petty criminals, and a few New York policemen."²

What a beautiful picture of God's Grace! We may also well be guilty of breaking this Law *Spiritually*. Let's first read from Scripture the result of a thief,

1 Corinthians 6:9 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders ¹⁰ *nor thieves* nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

~Emphasis added.

Very rarely do people consider the *spiritual* implications of a particular activity. We tend to focus on and be satisfied with the natural side of things; and, if we are not guilty in that area, we feel safe. In Malachi 3:8, God is speaking to the children of Israel about the fact that they have robbed Him of tithes and offerings. In other words, they were guilty of stealing from God; but they did not recognize it as such. The reason that their sin was not as evident to them as, let's say, someone coming into their home and taking their furniture, is because they (and if the truth were known, us also) had not really seen a lack of tithing as stealing. When we do not give God the tithe as He commanded, we are guilty of stealing from Him. Our sin is one of *withholding* rather than taking. Most individuals would not dream of taking money out of the offering plate; but some of those same individuals have no qualms about withholding or not putting God's portion *in* the offering plate. When confronted, they would classify the first as stealing and the second with a shrug of the shoulders.

T. Boone Pickens was addressing security analysts, and he made his point by relating this imagined dialogue: A banker calls in an oil man to review his loans. The banker says, "We let you borrow a million dollars to drill new wells, and they were all dry holes." And the oil man said, "Well, it could have been worse." And then the banker said, "We let you have another million dollars to get some new drilling equipment and all of it broke down." And the oil man said, "Well, it could

² Danielson, Jim; Kingsford, Missouri. Leadership, Vol. 11, no. 2.

have been worse." That's when the banker said, "I'm tired of hearing you say, 'It could have been worse.' How could it have been worse?" And the oil man said, "Well, it could have been my money."³

The Bible tells us that the tenth or *tithe* belongs to God. It's *God's* money. When we tithe, we are not giving God a tenth of what is ours but giving back to Him what is His in the first place. To *withhold* something is the same in God's eyes as stealing! It does not matter whether we are withholding from God or from a person. Now, we do not *naturally* look at things this way! What we focus on is the potential for abuse. If we refuse to give a homeless person some money, perhaps we refuse because of fear that we will be taken advantage of in some way. Therefore, we withhold because of a *potential* problem. Yet, we are commanded by the Holy Spirit, through the Apostle James, to meet the physical needs of individuals and not just meet their spiritual needs,

James 2:15-16 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

We give excuse to our conscience with the "what if" syndrome: "What if they keep coming back? "What if they ... and if we run out of "what ifs" we turn to "Yeah, but!" The Word of God is very clear as to our responsibility to those in need. "Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act" (Proverbs 3:27). "Yeah, but" we say, "It says 'to those who deserve it'; and this person is due zero!" If that is the course of our thinking, we have failed to realize that his "deserving" is not so much dependent on his *attitude* as his *need*. "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10). This principle of sharing was initiated under Moses and continues throughout the present church age,

Deuteronomy 15:7-10 If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. ⁸ Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. ⁹ Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: 'The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,' so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. ¹⁰ Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.

Matthew 5:41-42 If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

The principle of giving in this manner is difficult to adhere to because there is so much abuse. In the church I Pastor, we have two areas of ministry for helping those in need. The Bill Witting

³ Associated Press, 11-14-90

Memorial (BWM)⁴ Fund and the Outreach Team's food baskets were faced with the dilemma of certain individuals abusing those gifts. The answer came as God directed the Elders to incorporate another Biblical principle: 2 Thessalonians 3:10 "If you don't work, you don't eat"; so, the first box of food, tank of gas – whatever, is given with no thought of return. The second, and thereafter, is given with 2 Thessalonians 3:10 in view. What we do is require, where the individuals are able, several hours of work in exchange for a box of food. Interestingly enough, our pantry is overflowing; and those that have come back a second or third time have experienced a greater sense of accomplishment, since they were doing something for themselves. The lesson here is that we need to take the whole counsel of God into consideration. When we do not withhold from those in need, when we give according to Scripture, we are actually *lending* to the LORD; and God is no man's debtor. "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done" (Proverbs 19:17).

Hebrews 6:10 God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.

I John 3:16-17 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

When those Scriptures are tied in with Paul's words to the Christians at Galatia (Galatians 6:10), we come to understand that our responsibility in giving extends far beyond the financial and touches, also, on our time and talents. James 4:17 says, "Therefore, to him that knows to do good and does it not, it is sin."

May I suggest that when we have the opportunity to do good and we do not do it, that our sin is the sin of theft? Now, if this *spiritual* aspect is true about our dealings with each other and the poor of our community, is it not also true in our relationship with God? When we keep back something that is someone's due, it is stealing from them.

James 5:4 Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.

Jeremiah 2:26-27 As a thief is disgraced when he is caught, so the house of Israel is disgraced—they, their kings and their officials, their priests and their prophets. ²⁷ They say to wood, 'You are my father,' and to stone, 'You gave me birth.' They have turned their backs to me and not their faces; yet when they are in trouble, they say, 'Come and save us!'

According to the above Scripture, idolatry is a sin of theft, because it is taking from God that which is His by virtue of who He is and what He has done and giving it to another! Lack of praise

⁴ BWM is a Memorial Fund set up in loving memory of one of the members of Mayer Community Church who had a giving heart.

is also a sin of theft, because it is not giving glory to the Lord due His name! Refusing to minister within the body is a sin of theft, because God has instructed us to do so; and it is the right of every believer to be ministered unto; and, it is the *means* God has ordained for His body to minister to His body. i.e. If you have the gift of healing and have never ministered in that gift—you have robbed someone of God’s blessing. Very rarely does God go outside the means He has ordained and do a “private work”. We don’t like to think of these things, because they sound too much like personal responsibility. However, if we are serious about walking as Jesus walked; then, we need to give these things our undivided attention. 1 Peter 4:15-16 tells us that if we are going to suffer, it should be for Christianity and not because we have broken God’s Law(s). Paul instructed the Christians at Ephesus that they should stop stealing and work so that they would be able to help those who had needs.

Isn’t it time to stop stealing and go to work? Remember, “To him that knows to do good and does it not, it is *sin*” (James 4:17 KJV) —emphasis added.

A new convert went to his pastor and said, 'Before I was saved, I stole a rope from my neighbor's barn. After reading the story of Zacchaeus, I decided to return it. Yet my neighbor still isn't reconciled to me.' The preacher, noticing his downcast eyes, questioned him a bit further. 'Are you sure that's all you took from him, or is something else wrong?' Embarrassed, the man replied, 'I guess that's the problem. You see I didn't bring back what was attached to the rope – the man's prize calf!'⁵

Spiritual Stealing then could be defined as: “Withholding what rightfully belongs to another; or it could be depriving an individual of that which is theirs by inheritance.” It is a Christians' *right* to be loved by other Christians; it is a Christians' *right* to be ministered to by other Christians. When we withhold our love because of our anger or disappointment or any other reason, we are depriving that brother or sister of what is theirs by inheritance. As John stated in 1 John 4:11, “Brethren, we ought to love one another”.

This is an area that we could term: “The Christian’s Bill of Rights”. It consists of things that are ours from God because of Jesus; and things that are ours from each other because of Jesus. To withhold those things is to become guilty of the sin of stealing, and the Word of God is very clear and concise on this issue: “*Thou shalt not steal.*” If that is true in the *spiritual* realm, it is also true in the *natural* realm.

This Commandment is grouped together with other commandments that deal with a person's obligation in and to society. This Commandment encompasses the Laws that protect a person’s *property*. While it is true, especially for the Christian, that a person’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions (see Luke 12:15), that does *not* mean that we are not allowed to *have* possessions. It is also true that Christians are not supposed to lay up treasures on earth where there is the likelihood of theft. That does not mean that we are not to have *any* things of earthly value. It simply means that our possessions are not to have control over us. A good case in point is the commendation that is given to the Christians receiving the book of Hebrews. We are told

⁵ Parson's Technology; Ibid.

that they *joyfully accepted* when their possessions were confiscated. In other words, their *stuff* was appropriated by people it didn't belong to. They reacted to that theft in a joyful manner. It doesn't say they were joyful because they were robbed. They just refused to allow the thieves to rob them of their joy also. This proves that they were not possessed by their possessions. There are a lot of ways people steal ... perhaps there are even *legal* (by man's standards) ways to steal.

What are some of the ways that are considered by God to be stealing

Scripture has a great deal to say about taking advantage of those who are unable to defend themselves. One of the ways of stealing that God warned against was of falsifying weights and measures. If you buy what you think is a gallon of gas and the pump states you received a gallon of gas, but that pump is off by one-tenth for every gallon, and you only got nine-tenths instead of a full gallon, then you were "gypped". The measure was falsified. Proverbs 11:1 underscores this point, "A false balance is abomination to the LORD: but a just weight is his delight." There aren't a whole lot of Scriptures that state something is an abomination to the Lord; but stealing is! Human nature is very interesting on this point. When we know we have been "gypped", we tend to become very vocal about it; but what if the "false measure" was in our favor, would we be just as vocal? The New Testament admonition is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:6, "... In this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you."

When we *defraud* someone, we are stealing from them, whether that *defrauding* is *physical* or *spiritual*. For example, if we engage in immorality, we become guilty of stealing from others, our mates (actual or potential) and even ourselves. 1 Thessalonians 4:6 states that the Lord is the avenger in those situations. It is the Lord who looks out for our interests. It is the Lord who is our protector. Let me show you what happens when we defraud someone *spiritually*. The reason I want to use the *spiritual* is because, in God's eyes, it is more important. 2 Corinthians 2:10-11 says, "If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven – if there was anything to forgive – I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake,¹¹ in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes."

Satan steals! Why should we be surprised? He robs us of our peace; he robs us of our joy; he robs us of our confidence; he robs us of our love; he robs us of our relationships; and he robs us of our reputation. He is a thief! He robbed Adam and Eve of their innocence, and he has been conniving and thieving ever since. Do you know why he steals? He robs us because we let him. The Bible says, "Neither give place to the devil" (Ephesians 4:27).

Lack of Forgiveness is Stealing!

When we refuse to forgive, we *defraud* our brother or sister of what is rightfully his or hers, namely, forgiveness and a loving relationship. When we are guilty of stealing from them, we give Satan permission to take advantage of us—to steal from us. When we steal from someone, whether that be in the natural or spiritual realm, we are giving place to the devil; and, when we give place to the devil, he takes advantage of us. *He* defrauds *us*! This sounds a bit like poetic justice, doesn't it?

It appears that the above is one of God's ways of avenging the theft against our brother. Are you aware of what we just did? We started out talking about *spiritual theft* and then moved into talking about *natural theft* and came back around to *spiritual theft*. Do you know why? Because God is more concerned with *spiritual theft* than He is with whether or not someone stole the TV set!

That is *not* to say that God doesn't *care* if someone steals the TV, but it is to say that our property should *never* be more important than people; and, our physical *things* certainly are not more important to God than people are ... especially those that are defenseless.

Did Jesus steal? Isn't our goal to be like Jesus? The Bible says, "Let him that stole steal no more...." There are two words I want you to remember in relation to this Commandment against stealing: **Restitution and Retribution**,

Leviticus 6:4-7 When he thus sins and becomes guilty, he must return what he has stolen or taken by extortion, or what was entrusted to him, or the lost property he found, ⁵ or whatever it was he swore falsely about. *He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner on the day he presents his guilt offering.* ⁶ And, as a penalty, he must bring to the priest, that is, to the LORD, his guilt offering, a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. ⁷ In this way the priest will make atonement for him before the LORD, and he will be forgiven for any of these things he did that made him guilty. ~Emphasis added.

Restitution:

When an individual was robbed, and the thief apprehended, this Law provided for *Restitution* to be made; in fact, forgiveness was conditional upon restitution. Most of the other Laws dealt only in *Retribution*: the dispensing of reward or punishment. But here is a sin that can, at least to some extent, be put right; and God expects us to do so. For example, Zacchaeus told Jesus that he restored fourfold anything that he had stolen; and Jesus commended him. How the Law of *Restitution* would apply to spiritual theft is beyond my immediate understanding; although, I am sure that were we serious about this and asked God what we should do considering His Word and our guilt, He would direct our steps in righteousness.

Retribution:

The Bible also addresses our tendency of not giving "full value" for what we receive. The following can apply to employer/employee relationships as well as the literal meaning of accurate measure.

Deuteronomy 25:13-16 Do not have two differing weights in your bag one heavy, one light. ¹⁴ Do not have two differing measures in your house one large, one small. ¹⁵ You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. ¹⁶ *For the LORD your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly.* ~Emphasis added.

It is of great significance here in this passage of scripture, in the same context of *honesty* in our dealings, that there is a reference made to Amalek, and his attack on Israel (see verses 17-19).

The Amalekites were a nation that plagued Israel time and again. They are symbolic in our present age of the works of the flesh. In other words, God is going to give Amalek a personal object lesson in retribution. He is going to use Israel to deal with Amalek. The Biblical principle here is that of just recompense or punishment. Perhaps we are not as honest with ourselves as we could be. By that I mean that we have a bad habit of glossing over those areas of Scripture that do not suit our present circumstances, desires or mind-set,

Hebrews 2:2-3 For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment,³ how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.

According to Deuteronomy 25, there are positive and negative recompenses to this Commandment:

POSITIVE – GOD’S BLESSING:

That justice and equity will bring down upon us the blessing of God. The way to have our days lengthened, and to prosper, is to be just and fair in all our dealings. Honesty is the best policy.⁶ ~Matthew Henry

NEGATIVE – GOD’S CURSE:

That fraud and injustice will expose us to the curse of God, v. 16. Not only unrighteousness itself, but all that do unrighteously, are an abomination to the Lord. And miserable is that man who is abhorred by his Maker.⁷ ~Matthew Henry

We are reminded by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6 that those guilty of *stealing* will not inherit the Kingdom. So, this sin of *stealing* is more than merely taking something which does not belong to us. It is a serious violation of God’s principles for our life.

⁶ BibleSoft; Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells His disciples a parable, using talents as an illustration. He said: “The Kingdom of heaven is like” The Church, is the manifestation of *the Kingdom*, but the Kingdom is also future. May I suggest that the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven (I believe they are synonymous) is *any place* where God is King! In this parable, Christ is the person traveling into a far country, and we are His servants. Now, according to this parable we have been given talents. The *talent* in Jesus’ day was a medium of exchange. In modern terminology—money; but, in this parable, He is not talking about money. He is talking about some gifts He has given you.

In this parable, the Master *expected* for His servants to put those gifts to work. The one who did not have it taken away. Now, I’m not going to argue with you about the doctrinal implications of this passage; nor am I going to debate with you as to the meaning of *talents*. What I want you to see is the Law of Recompense at work in relation to something Jesus gave to His Disciples. When you use what He gave, you gain; and you are rewarded. When you withhold what He gave, you lose; and you enter judgment.

During World War II the U.S. submarine ***Tang*** surfaced under the cover of darkness to fire upon a large Japanese convoy off the coast of China. Since previous raids had left the American vessel with only eight torpedoes, the accuracy of every shot was absolutely essential. The first seven torpedoes were right on target; but when the eighth was launched, it suddenly deviated and headed right back at their own submarine. The emergency alarm to submerge rang out, but it was too late. Within a matter of seconds, the U.S. sub received a direct hit and sank almost instantly.⁸

~Emphasis added.

In much the same way, when we are guilty of stealing, *natural or spiritual stealing* we destroy ourselves, because our greatest defense, the power of God, becomes our greatest enemy. The Law reads: ***Thou shalt not steal***. One of the amazing things about God’s love is that He provides *mercy* and *grace* to help us in our walk on the Highway of Holiness.

Jesus has paid the penalty for all of our thefts; and, waits for us to come to Him and claim, not only His forgiveness, but also the provision that He has made. We don’t have to steal anymore!

Prayer for Forgiveness:

Once again, Father, I have not been fully aware of the meaning of Your Word. I do not want to be guilty any longer of stealing, either from You, or from anyone else, either in the *natural* realm or in the *spiritual* realm. I recognize that stealing in any form, whether taking something that does not belong to me or failing to give as you have instructed me, is sin. I repent of this sin in my life, and I submit myself to the leading of Your Holy Spirit to help me make just restitution to those I have defrauded. I am aware that my heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, and that I cannot be trusted to examine my own heart because of its wicked tendency. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and

⁸ Parson’s Technology, Ibid.

see if there be any wicked tendency to steal in me, and then lead me in Your everlasting way. In Jesus' name and for His sake I pray, Amen.

Another area of great effectiveness for the “enemy of our souls” is lying. The Bible says he was a liar from the beginning. The next Chapter will explore more fully this pit of human experience.