

EXODUS 20:15

(Reading: WSC 73-75; Joshua 7:1-26)

The Eighth Commandment

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

The sin of Achan, which we read of in Joshua 7, had devastating consequences for the whole Hebrew nation.

One man's secret sin of stealing meant the loss of lives and a terrible disgrace.

The disposition of the entire nation was instantly changed.

That's what sin does.

It is all because it was someone else's.

In this case, it was the Lords'.

What was meant to be dedicated solely to their God - YAHWEH - by their LORD Himself, was taken from Him without His consent; in fact, it was taken in secret.

And there we have, in summary, what the word "steal" in Exodus 20:15 means.

It's about when we take something belonging to someone else, without their permission, and we do it in secret.

Well, Achan knew that if he did it openly he wouldn't have got away with it.

But even more than that, behind it there's the attitude of greed where he believed he could snatch it in the first place.

Congregation... IT'S SOMEONE ELSE'S'!

Our first aspect this morning... IT'S SOMEONE ELSE'S'!

This is where the story of Achan can teach us about more than just stealing.

It tells us that whatever we don't have is of God - whether it's meant to be dedicated to God or anyone else!

Martin Luther said, "Next to your life and your wife, your worldly goods stand closest to you and God means them to be secured to you and therefore commands that no one shall take away or lessen any part of his neighbour's possessions."

Dear believer, the love we are meant to have for our neighbour, which sums up this whole second table of the Law, involves us keeping sacred not only his person (the sixth commandment), and his marriage (the seventh commandment), but also what he owns and what he's owed - which is our respect!

To gain a broader understanding, though, let's turn to see the history behind how this came about.

This temptation to take what belongs to someone else has come about because fallen man always, naturally, wants more than what he's got, and more than what others have.

Blind competitiveness, showing an equally blind jealousy, was the heart of Satan's pride when he rebelled against God.

'Keeping up with the Jones's', as a common phrase goes about not wanting to have anything less than what the neighbour's have got, was right there from the beginning.

It's there in Cain's heart in Genesis 4, when in his pride he killed Abel (vv4-8).

It's there in Genesis 27 with the pride of Rebekah and Jacob, when they stole Esau's birthright.

It will pop up anywhere, for we really **want** it, and our hearts are set on having it.

But...IT'S SOMEONE ELSE'S!

This is probably why the punishment for most crimes of stealing in the Old Testament involved restitution to the victim of twice the amount he had stolen.

That meant the thief lost the exact amount he had hoped to gain!

Imagine the radical and yet most positive effect that would have to our soaring crime rate!

For the thing that had been lusted for, that physical possession so much greed had been poured out for, that exact thing has to be given!

While that punishment may have seemed mild by the standards of that time, and harsh compared with the punishments of courts today, it precisely hit the point!

The point which is about what the LORD has given to someone else.

Now, some may say, at this point, "But there are so many people who flout or break the law, and they get rich."

"Why can't we take from those who've already got far too much?"

This can be called the 'Robin Hood' complex.

Under the influence of socialist philosophy we have this idea that wealth should be more equitably shared around.

The fact is that it isn't.

You know, even if everyone in the whole world started off with the same amount, it wouldn't be long and we would have the same differences again in society.

When our Lord spoke of the poor always being with us He referred to much more than a certain amount of material possessions - it's a whole mentality!

It's a lifestyle of it's own.

Congregation, what this commandment comes down to is this: Ownership is stewardship.

That's the biblical view of property.

And so, while we acknowledge, that, by human law, whatever I own or can dispose of, is given to me as a trust.

What I have, are, in Jesus' words, 'talents'.

I've only got it for a little while, here, on this earth, to use for Him.

Isn't that what we pray in our offertory prayer?

We recognise that all we have is the Lords' - it's a trust from Him.

One day you're going have to tell God how you got on with those things He gave you to use.

Because as well as the acknowledgment first of all that IT'S SOMEONE ELSE'S!...there comes the realisation that... YOU'VE GOT YOUR OWN!

Our second aspect this morning... YOU'VE GOT YOUR OWN!

You see, taking isn't giving.

Being worried about what you don't have isn't going to help you be blessed through what you do have.

There is a saying most of us would have heard.

It goes like this: 'The difference between an optimist and a pessimist is whether your glass is half-full or half-empty.'

Now think, congregation, that easily translates into whether you're happy with what you've got, or you're not happy with what you've got.

Think of the spirit in a church.

A church can feel down because she sees all those things which she hasn't got, and which other churches have, instead of being determined to get on with what she's already got.

When you look around you in a church service you shouldn't think about those who aren't there but be thankful for those who are there!

So, dear friend, in your heart is there that seed of greed?

Are your thoughts so often filled with all the things which you don't have - the nice house, the flashy car, the well-paid job?

And there's lot more where that came from!

There are many ways we can take away from other people.

There's cheating, swindling, fraudulent schemes, inaccurate measures of weight, size or volume, counterfeit money, and excessive interest.

And we can detail these some more too.

For what about when we steal 'time'?

This is actually one of the commonest types of theft today.

Employees contract to so many hours' work for so much pay and they don't do it.

We start late, finish early, stretch the coffee break and lunch and dinner, and waste time inbetween.

And then there's debts that we don't pay - well, not straight away anyway!

Scripture tells us to pay the wages of a hired man the same day he worked, but you can be waiting around in the building trade for literally months before you get a cent!

As well it's theft to steal someone's reputation.

Shakespeare wrote, "He who steals my purse, steals rubbish, but he that takes from me my good name, he makes me poor indeed."

It really cut us to the heart - doesn't it?

We thought this command had nothing to do with us.

But, now, those words of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4 verse 28 are exactly **for me**.

For there he says, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands...".

In fact, what Paul goes on to say expresses the way we should be using our possessions.

For he declares it's so you "...may have something to share with those in need."

Friend...YOU'VE GOT YOUR OWN!

This is why Answer 74 of the Catechism can positively say about this 8th commandment that we're to further the wealth and well-being of others!

Congregation, let's get back to what we think about what we have.

Have we realised it's not ours by right?

Has that truth sunk in?

Perhaps I can refer you to what you place in the offering bag.

Is that an amount you would, if asked, be happy to declare?

Not because you're proud of it, and certainly not because we're meant to do it - because Jesus tells us something quite different about that - but, rather, because you're **giving**.

Jesus saw a widow in the temple giving just two copper coins.

But He knew that was true giving - she gave because she knew she had been given.

In contrast, when Jesus saw the wealthy men giving what appeared to be lots of money He knew it wasn't giving but **taking**.

They weren't giving and giving generously, without conditions, because that's what a gift really is, they were actually taking because they stuck to the exact limit of the tithe, so that they could keep taking **from the LORD**.

It's when we change from this taking to truly giving that we stop stealing too!

I'm serious!

Although you may never have actually pinched a cent in your life, you could still be stealing in your heart.

Wasn't this the lesson for the rich young ruler in Luke 18?

There he came to Jesus, so full of himself.

And when Jesus asked him the standard question about whether he had kept the law, 'You beaut, no worries'! he had done it!

But when Jesus asked him if he was really willing to **give**, that was too much.

When the Lord said to him in verse 22, "You still lack one thing.

"Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.

"Then come, follow me..." that cut to the core!

He was rich.

Mind you, his problem wasn't all the money he had, but the attitude he had towards that money.

He wasn't rich in God!

And the LORD says the same thing to those who serve Him in the offices of the church.

In the apostle Peter's first letter, chapter 5, He says, "Be shepherds of God's flock that's under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; **not greedy for money, but eager to serve**; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." (v2f)

Jesus' answer to those who are in Him is... THEN GIVE IT BACK!

Our third aspect this morning... THEN GIVE IT BACK!

Congregation, we have come under a different influence than this world's.

It's not dog eats dog, as the current corporate capitalism boldly proclaims.

It's not survival of the fittest, in the words of the evolutionist Charles Darwin; it's revival of the weakest, in the works of the creationist Jesus Christ!

For if there is one thing that happens when God's Spirit comes upon people in its convicting power - and that is the recognition of this commandment!

All the who-ha about revivals amongst churches in recent years has been a lot of hype, because it hasn't **shown** the difference.

Has the Australian Taxation Office reported any sudden increase in its income because people have been sorry they have tricked their way out of paying what they owe?

Have office and factories and all the other places of work seen a massive return of all those things pilfered in the past?

Or perks as some call them.

You could certainly see it in genuine revivals.

The 1920's Belfast revival resulted in converted shipyard workers bringing back so many tools and equipment they had "knocked off" that in one place an extra store room had to be built to keep it all!

See what happened to Zaccheus when he was saved!

You can read it in Luke 19.

"Look, Lord!" he says in verse 8.

"Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount!"

Congregation, that's why Jesus could say to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost."

Here was a man who had been a tax collector -the openly known con men of the time - and on top of all that he was one of the worst of them - a **chief** tax collector.

And look at him!

He met Jesus.

He came under the changing power of the Gospel.

He gave it back!

Now, Zacchaeus didn't need to be told.

He who had always been a physical son of Abraham became part of His spiritual seed, because he believed.

Friend, it could be that much of a challenge for you today too!

The LORD, by this preaching about not stealing could be asking you if you really do believe.

Are you truly **giving** or just **taking**?

Have you come here this morning to give yourself and everything you are to the LORD...or are you trying to take something out of this?

Perhaps that taking is just to please your family or friends; it keeps them happy and that way you can get more out of them, even if it's just a kind of a peaceful situation at home or wherever.

Perhaps that taking is to try and salve your own conscience.

Something you've been doing for years, as though coming to church adds up brownie points for you.

Can you see - this isn't giving?

This is till taking!

And why else are we here except that the Great God gave the greatest gift in His own dear Son, Jesus Christ, so that we might have the new life and have it in all its fullness.

Giving showed its true worth when Christ cried out from the cross, with His dying breath, the most self-sacrificing words, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Dear person in the pew - have you given like Him?

In fact, has He become the Lord and Saviour of your life?

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O Most Greatest Giver of all, our Heavenly Father, how much don't we humbly bow in Your presence now?

For who are we and what have we done?

And yet in our lives we just seem to keep on taking and taking, without truly giving like You have given supremely in Your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

LORD, so move Your Spirit in Your people that we may show we are true sons of Abraham, the children of faith, those who live to give.

Because then they can see - we're just like you.

Through Jesus' saving Name alone, we pray, Amen.