

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 26 and 27, 2003
The Rev. C. Allen Kannapell

Thou shalt not steal.

My cousin's friends were driving through an unfamiliar neighborhood on their way to lunch when a cat ran out in front of their car. They tried to stop but couldn't and ended up killing the cat. Being good citizens and neighbors even in a strange neighborhood, they knocked on house doors all around in order to apologize to the cat's owners, but couldn't find its home.

They went to their appointed lunch carrying the deceased cat and planning to return afterwards to try and find the owners again on their way back through. They stopped at the restaurant. It was a hot day, and they were unwilling to leave the cat in the car so they pulled out a Bloomingdale's shopping bag from the trunk, put the cat in the bag in the shade of the car by the curb and went into the restaurant. They sat down with a nice view of the street where they could see their car.

A few minutes into the meal they noticed a woman walking down the street unusually close to the curb and saw her, without missing a step, shoot her hand down, pick up the bag by the handle and walk toward the restaurant -- all without looking in the bag or changing her expression.

Their amazement was only deepened when she entered the eatery, sat down in a booth across the way and placed the bag on top of the table.

The waiter brought her water then coffee. They watched as she placed her order.

At last, undoubtedly hoping to find some clothing of high fashion and good taste, she brought the bag down to her lap and looked inside. She screamed, reared back and knocked herself out on the wall behind the booth.

An ambulance was called. She was revived and put on a stretcher. The helpful manager saw the bag on the table, picked it up, ran outside, and placed it in the back of the ambulance; they shut the doors and away she went.

Thou shalt not steal.

This week and the next six, we will be looking at the six of the ten commandments -- the last six commandments, all of which focus primarily on how we treat other people. At a later date we will look at the first four commandments -- the ones which focus primarily on how we relate to God himself.

Week by week we will look at a commandment and consider three things:

How keeping the commandment will set us free.

How each commandment sheds light on God's character.

How we can take steps to keep that commandment.

In addition, this morning, since its our first week in the series, I hope to address how the law fits in with the Gospel.

I. Many inside the church are confused about the relationship between the law and the Gospel.

If grace is a free gift why follow any law? To be sure, we know intuitively that murder, adultery and stealing are still off limits even if we died to the law and are no longer bound by it. Our modern church is very confused on this issue and is rapidly opening up to doors to approve many things the church has always held as sinful, and it is doing this in the name of Christian liberty.

If it is true that we are free from the law, what does this mean?

Our freedom is not a freedom to do whatever we want rather it is a freedom to do what is good through the power of Christ.

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:1-4)

You are free from the law's demands because Christ died and, as a baptized person, you were baptized with Him in His death. The price for breaking the law has been paid. You are free from the punishment required. But just as Christ was raised so too are we raised with Him so that we might walk in newness of life.

It's not just Paul in Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians that said this. Jesus speaks of this often in the Gospel:

“If you love me, keep my commandments.” (John 14:15)

“Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets, I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” (Matthew 5:17-18)

II. Why keep them at all?

Many outside the church look quizzically upon people inside it. "Why would somebody burden themselves by agreeing to follow a bunch more rules?" I've had people tell me that they've thought about becoming Christians, but that they don't want to give up having fun.

Why limit yourself?

Why go against your natural desires?

The law limits. The law cramps. The law shackles.

Let's take "Thou shalt not steal."

What would life be like if no one stole anything?

On the spectacular side there would be:

No muggings

No murders to keep witnesses to theft quiet

and consequently, no fear from these terrible things

On the more mundane side:

There would be no insurance for theft. Think how much money you would save in car and house insurance over your life time.

The cost of retail goods would be less as the increased price built into ensure profit even after theft would be done away with.

Have any of you ever lost your keys?

Wouldn't it be lovely to never need them again?

If we kept the commandment, we would be much more free!

Free from fear, from unnecessary costs, from keys.

The woman who picked up the Bloomingdale's bag would have been free from a terrible shock and a pounding headache.

III. How can we guard ourselves against stealing? Most of the time our theft involves lying (another commandment we will turn to in the weeks ahead). I'm probably not speaking to as many bank robbers or cat burglars today as I am to people who cheat on their income tax. Cheating on income tax is lying as well as stealing. To guard against it we have to look at the causes in ourselves.

Why do we steal?

Covetousness

Laziness

Let God be everything to satisfy you. Realize that the bag might look attractive but later on when you have to give your account for your actions you will be horrified by what you find.

How we safeguard against stealing

1. Recognize how we steal -- not many are bank robbers and cat burglars, but we steal in less "exciting" ways:

- a. Copying CD's off the Internet illegally
- b. Copying books without permission
- c. Cheating on our income taxes.

Failing to report income is very tempting to "save" \$500 or \$5000. Think of all you can do with it. We say, "The government is taking my money!" No its not, you elected them and can work to change them. Be aware of what you are doing -- just because we don't tote a gun and mug people doesn't mean we're not stealing.

2. Recognize why we steal

- a. Failure to think about right and wrong when it seems everyone else does it. This is intellectual and moral flabbiness.
- b. Covetousness
- c. Laziness

3. We confess and bring it to light -- making restitution possible. If you get in the habit of bringing your faults to light, two things will happen.

- a. You'll remember the pain of embarrassment so well that you will have the strength to resist temptation the next time.
- b. The humility this induces will keep you depending on God.

When you repent and confess a sin to a mature brother or sister, you put it to death, breaking its power over you. If you lack money, you need to go to God. Let Him supply your need physically or spiritually.

IV. God gives the commandment for our freedom, not to shackle us, and this commandment, like all others He gives, sheds light on God's character. We are not to steal because God doesn't steal, and we are His children living with Christ's life in us.

God is an abundant giver. He's not the type of God to take your clothes off your back. God the Son took off His heavenly splendor and served us as a slave. Surrounded by glory, honor and praise in heaven, He died naked on a cross.

Thou shalt not steal
rather give.

Thou shalt not steal
rather empty yourself, take the Lord who gives abundantly.

In conclusion:

Keeping the ten commandments is not some type of legalism snuck back into the church. God gives His commands to free us from fear, from unnecessary costs and unnecessary keys and the stress attendant in having keys and losing them.

We looked at how we steal and what we can do to guard against it.

Finally we see that God's command not to steal sheds light on His character and who we are called to be -- not dishonest thieves but abundant givers as He is an abundant giver.