



SESSION 9

DO NOT STEAL

At the turn of the millennium, a debate about technology and ethics began over something many would consider a minor offense. Shawn Fanning, John Fanning, and Sean Parker formed a program enabling computers to share files. They called it *Napster*. The program allowed users to share media across the Internet through a peer-to-peer network, thus giving birth to the phenomena of illegally downloading music and movies.

Within months, teenagers who had computers and high-speed connections could bypass music stores and download songs from one another and save them to recordable compact discs. Many of you who are reading this session probably used similar file-sharing services at some point in the past.

The rise and fall of Napster raises the question of stealing. What does it mean to commit theft? Why does God condemn stealing? Should we only be worried about stealing that has legal consequences? Does the enforcing of the law matter? Questions like this take us back to the Scriptures, where God commanded His people to not steal.

The Eighth Commandment Shows That...

God Forbids Stealing

Stealing comes from a covetous heart. Whenever we desire to have something that belongs to someone else, we are coveting. The word covet is not common in our everyday vocabulary, but it means to desire something that does not belong to us. In a world loaded with advertising at every turn, it is easy to focus on the items we do not have or cannot afford. Commercials for cars, fashion, and electronics tell us that we can have a better life by owning new products. The items themselves may not be evil; it's how we feel about what we do not yet have is where the struggle lies.

Stealing brings our covetous nature to the surface. It begins as a desire in our mind, and then it results in the action of taking something that doesn't belong to us. James 1 breaks down the process of temptation and sin, telling us that each man is drawn by his own desire. It is the sinful desire within us that leads us to covet and eventually steal.



Deuteronomy 5:19
Do not steal.

► Why does God condemn both stealing and coveting? What is the connection between the two?

[illegible]

Now, don't get me wrong, but even though Robin Hood's motivation for stealing may have been different from the rest, I still think that what he does is ethically wrong (sorry if I'm speaking ill of your hero). The fact remains that his stealing, along with the others, is rooted in some form of covetousness.



Stealing Includes Dishonesty

Stealing is not just robbing a bank or shoplifting in a store. There are many forms of theft, and all of them are a sin before God. This passage lets us know that “do not steal” applies to more than outright theft of someone’s belongings. Stealing is also a matter of trust.

An example of dishonest dealings is plagiarism. Since it does not carry the same label as stealing, nor the same authoritative discipline, many believers don't think of plagiarism as stealing. There is frightening evidence that Christian high school and college students regularly succumb to the temptation of buying or downloading term papers for the sake of a good grade.

► **What are some examples of stealing non-monetary items? What kinds of stealing do people in society overlook or accept? Explain your answer.**

[illegible]

The Surprise Connection

Pop quiz: What do Ebenezer Scrooge, Homer Simpson, Al Capone, and TS Eliot have in common?

Answer: They all committed theft. Sure, not blatant, pickpocket, Ocean's Eleven style theft. But theft nevertheless.

Ebenezer Scrooge is remembered as Dickens' famous character who did not pay his clerk, Bob Cratchit, a fair wage. As part of his journey with the Ghost of Christmas Future, Scrooge sees that Bob's son, Tiny Tim, has died because Scrooge didn't pay Bob enough money to care for him. In other words, Scrooge stole work from Bob Cratchit. Homer Simpson is

Deuteronomy 25:13-16

You must not have two different weights in your bag, one heavy and one light. You must not have two differing dry measures in your house, a larger and a smaller. You must have a full and honest weight, a full and honest dry measure, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. For everyone who does such things and acts unfairly is detestable to the LORD your God.

Plagiarism is not just stealing, but also lying (which is forbidden in the Ninth Commandment). This activity gives a false perception that you created something when in fact, someone else did. If you are guilty of plagiarism you are stealing credit for someone else's work. This would include hiring someone else to write a paper or buying a paper written by someone else.

► **Would you consider copying someone else's school work to be stealing? How about laziness at school or at home? Why or why not?**

famous for (among other things) his laziness. In one episode, he wears glasses with eyes painted on the lenses so that his boss, Mr. Burns, won't see him sleeping. In other words, Homer is stealing time from his boss. Al Capone, in spite of being so famous for his many crimes, was only ever convicted of one: tax evasion. It landed him in jail for several years. Finally, TS Eliot is a renowned poet whose poem *The Wasteland* gets at least a mention in almost all high schools. Yet, turns out, much of it was probably stolen from the poem "Waste Land," a work by a little-known poet named Madison Cawein.

What's the point behind mentioning these four figures? To show that stealing isn't always the black-and-white, taking-from-someone kind. We are thieves if we don't pay people their due wage, respect, or honor; when we don't give 100% on the job, in school, or at practice; when we evade taxes, no matter what rationalization we use; and when we copy other people's work, even if we think doing so is a form of flattery. Theft is not so much about taking an object as it is the state of our hearts. And if our hearts don't give what they should to God or other people, as much as if they take things from others, we're guilty of theft.



We Should Give and Not Take

The Gospel of Luke gives us insight into how Christ can change our selfishness to generosity. As Jesus was journeying from Jerusalem to Jericho, He stopped to acknowledge a man named Zaccheus. Here is what we know about Zacchaeus at the beginning of this encounter: he was a chief tax collector, he was rich, and he was short. Tax collectors at this time were viewed as thieves, often taking more than what was owed.

Luke 19:5-10

When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down because today I must stay at your house." So he quickly came down and welcomed Him joyfully. All who saw it began to complain, "He's gone to lodge with a sinful man!" But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, I'll give half of my possessions to the poor, Lord! And if I have extorted anything from anyone, I'll pay back four times as much!" "Today salvation has come to this house," Jesus told him, "because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost".

After meeting Jesus in a very humiliating way, he was quick to respond with joy. He offered to give half of his possessions to the poor and pay back those whom he took advantage of at an exorbitant interest rate. His change of heart was immediately evident.

► Do you agree with Jesus' words that it is more blessed to give than to receive? Why or why not? How can your life display this truth?

More Blessed to Give

Imagine this scenario: Tommy and James are both little boys sitting on a park bench. Tommy has a little bag of cookies his mom packed him; James doesn't have anything. Tommy opens his bag and starts munching on the cookies. He notices James glancing at him hungrily. Tommy continues eating, but then guilt gnaws at him. He glances back at James, then, begrudgingly says, "I guess I should share these cookies with you."

Now re-imagine it. It starts the same, but this time when Tommy sees James glancingly at him hungrily, he immediately smiles broadly and holds the bag open to James. "I don't like to see you hungry. It'd make me happy if you'd share my cookies with me." Now, in which scenario would James be happier? Even more importantly, in which scenario would Tommy be happier?

The opposite of stealing is giving. Stealing is motivated by a heart that seeks joy in the possessions, comfort, work, or time that rightfully belong to another. Giving is motivated by a heart that seeks joy in the joy of other people. Tommy finds his happiness in James' happiness, and he can't be happy until James is happy. Pretty much anyone with a child or a pet knows this intuitively. When my wife and I see how happy our dog is to get a treat, it makes us happy; we think it's cute to see her wiggle and squirm with happiness. Likewise, our parents love to give us good gifts; they find their joy in our joy. This is why Jesus said it's more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). When we give with joy, we experience a little bit of what it's like to be God. He gives to us because he loves to see us supremely happy in Himself. May we, too, have hearts that seek our own joy by giving to the joy of other people.

This is what the gospel does. Because we have been shown generosity by Christ, we understand what it means to have someone be spiritually generous to us in our state of poverty. Zacchaeus was relationally and spiritually poor. Jesus was generous to Him; and because of His generosity, Zacchaeus was no longer lost but found.

► **When was a time in your life that you found great joy in giving, whether an object, time, money, or work? Would you still have gotten great joy if the recipient hadn't gotten joy from your gift? Why or why not?**

GOD'S STORY, YOUR STORY

As mentioned throughout the lesson, there are a number of areas within our everyday life and culture where stealing seems commonplace. Between music, movies, and homework assignments, stealing is a constant temptation. One of the great points mentioned throughout this session is the fact that stealing is ultimately an issue concerning the heart. When coveting takes place, and there isn't another means of acquiring something, the heart will result to stealing in order to get what it wants. Thus, the thief's main problem isn't his behavior of stealing—his biggest problem is the heart behind his stealing.

What are some additional examples of stealing that you hear frequently take place? What are some examples of stealing that people try to pass off as non-stealing (homework assignments, for instance)?

Stealing, as well as coveting, reveals a deeper issue of idolatry within one's heart. In other words, if one were to knowingly download illegal music, not only would that act display covetousness within the heart, but it would also highlight the fact that music became an idol over God. The thing or person that is sitting on the throne of the heart will win every time. And in this case, an idol of acquiring something without pay took precedent over God's rightful reign over the heart.

Explain the connection between stealing and idolatry of the heart. Why is it important to not overlook this connection?