

Honor Other's Property – Exodus 20:15,17

I. INTRODUCTION

A. "How Much Land Does A Man Need?"

1. Leo Tolstoy was a brilliant author who was wonderfully skilled at capturing human nature.
2. He wrote a short story titled, "How Much Land Does A Man Need?"
3. In the story, a peasant named Pahom became the owner of some property, and the ownership inflamed him with a lust for more.
4. A traveling merchant told him of a far-off land where vast tracts of land could be had for a pittance.
5. So Pahom traveled there to discover virgin, fertile soil, covered in grasses chest high.
6. Pahom asked the chief of the people who lived there if he could buy land and how much it would be.
 - a. the chief told him he could have it for 1000 rubles.
 - b. Pahom asked how much land a thousand rubles would buy, and the chief said, "A day's worth."
 - c. Pahom didn't understand, being used to land being measured by acres.
 - d. the chief explained, "A thousand rubles will buy as much land as you can encircle in a day's travel by foot."
 - e. Pahom was amazed; such an incredible deal. He knew that he could travel far in a day and agreed to measure out the tract of land he would buy the next day.
7. Pahom went to sleep that night excited about what the next day would surely bring.
 - a. as he slept, he dreamed, and in his dream he saw himself asleep in his tent, with someone laughing outside it.
 - b. going forth he found the chief sitting in front of his tent, holding his sides and rolling about in laughter.
 - c. as he came closer in his dream to the old man, he saw that it wasn't really the chieftain, it was the traveling merchant who'd told him of the land.
 - d. then it was the devil himself with horns and cloven hooves, chuckling away.
 - e. lying on the ground before the laughing demon was a barefoot man wearing only ragged pants and thread-bare shirt.
 - f. as Pahom in his dream looked closer at the man, he saw that he was dead – and the man was *himself!*
8. Pahom woke at dawn in a sweat, and chalked up his dream to his excitement.
9. He quickly made his way to the little hill where the chief and a few of his people awaited the beginning of the measure of the land Pahom would buy.
10. Pahom dropped his thousand rubles into the chief's hat, and then began his circuit of the land he wanted.
 - a. the further he walked, the richer the land seemed to become.
 - b. as the mid-morning came, an inner voice told him he ought to begin to turn, but a further field with a small hill and a stream at its base beckoned him so he held his course straight on.
 - c. at mid-day he realized he must make his 1st turn and start back.
 - d. then at mid-afternoon he made the 2nd turn and realized that if was going to make it back to the starting point by sundown he would have to more than double his pace.
 - e. so he began to run, but the ground became uneven and he ended up tripping and falling several times, wrenching his ankle and twisting his knees and hip.
 - f. it was late afternoon when he made the 3rd turn and began a sprint for the hill where the chief and his people waited.
 - g. far off in the distance he could see the hill and measured the distance against the falling sun.

- h. a fear swept over him – would he make it in time? He was winded and bruised, but the prospect of the lands he'd encompassed that day drove him on.
 - i. two more falls slowed him to the point that he began to despair of reaching the hill in time.
 - j. he pushed himself past the fatigue, hearing the faint cheers of the people as they urged him on to complete the circuit; "Faster!" they yelled. "You're almost there. Keep going. Don't give up. Faster now, don't let the sun beat you."
 - k. Pahom arrived at the hill just as the sun sank below the horizon, but he'd pushed himself too hard, and fell down before the chief.
 - l. gasping for breath, he felt a searing pain in his chest. Then all went black and he died.
11. Tolstoy ends the story with these words, "Pahom's servant picked up the shovel and dug a grave long enough for Pahom to lie in, and buried him in it. Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed."

B. The Race Is Still Being Run

1. There are millions, even *billions* of Pahoms today.
2. And they're running their races in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, London, Paris, Munich, Moscow, Beijing, and Bombay. And the race is *killing* them.
3. It's a race for *more!* It's a race driven by the voice of greed, the cries of the world which egg us on and call us to define our lives by what we possess, rather than *Who* possesses us.
4. Two of the Ten Commandments are potent rebukes to the counsel of the world in this regard – the 8th and the 10th.
5. We find them in Exodus 20:15 & 17.

II. BODY

A. The 8th and 10th Commandments

15 "You shall not steal.

17 "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that *is* your neighbor's."

1. The 8th Commandment is even more brief in Hebrew – "No stealing"
2. The 10th says "No *desiring* another's house, or spouse, or computer mouse."
 - a. the word translated as "covet" in our English Bible simply means *desire*
 - b. that word is neutral – it's flavor determined by *what's* desired.
 - c. and in this case, it's a *prohibited* desire because what's wanted belongs to someone else!
3. The 10th Commandment is different from the previous 9 in that while they all deal with actions, the 10th speaks directly to the *heart*.
4. The 8th Commandment prohibits *taking* what belongs to another; the 10th prohibits even *wanting* it.
5. And the reason God spells this out in such clarity is because of the far-reaching effects of the Fall.

B. The Effects of the Fall

1. You see, the great tragedy that occurred to the human race when Adam & Eve sinned was the profound re-orientation of their being and identity.
2. They went from being primarily *spiritually* to *physically* oriented.
3. This is proven by the fact that the very first thing that happened when they fell was that their eyes were opened and they became aware of their naked *what – **BODIES!***
 - a. it's not that they had their eyes *shut* prior to that,
 - b. but that they'd related to God, themselves and one another from a *spiritual* orientation in which the body was merely a vehicle in which they lived on earth.
 - c. with the Fall, the importance of the body and their place in the world *eclipsed* the higher and

- more important reality of the spirit.
- d. they began immediately to cater to the demands of that body – and moved to cloth it.
4. Indeed – it was the whole desire for *more* than they originally possessed that prompted Eve to Fall *in the first place*.
 - a. the devil’s original appeal to her was to stir up *discontent*.
 - b. he suggested that God was with-holding something from her that would *enrich* her and provide even *greater satisfaction*.
 5. How crucial we realize that this same tactic, this same *bent* has been *permanently etched* into fallen human nature.
 6. And it’s why God gives both the 8th & 10th Commandments.
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7. Notice how early in life we learn to steal.
 - a. though it’s a clear violation of conscience, children will take what doesn’t belong to them.
 - b. even parents who have raised their children with a strong sense of virtue and morality can tell stories of how their young child snitched something that wasn’t his/hers.
 - c. when one of my sons was 4, we went in to a convenience store to pick up some quick groceries.
 - 1) as we walked by the candy aisle on our way to the counter, he stopped to look.
 - 2) I didn’t think anything of it and paid for the items, then called him to follow me out to the car.
 - 3) when we were driving out of the parking lot I noticed he was acting rather strangely and asked him what was wrong.
 - 4) he didn’t say anything, but when we got home I saw him furtively sticking his hand in his pocket.
 - 5) it hit me – he snitched some candy. You know how I knew? Because I’d done the very same thing when I was about his age!
 - 6) sure enough, there in his pocket were some little candies, so we drove back to the store and I made him go to the clerk, apologize and pay for them!
 8. Sign up to work in the Nursery or with the toddlers – it’s a graduate level education in human psychology & Child development.
 - a. if you do, you’ll see the bent *toward* and penchant *for* theft and covetousness writ large!
 - b. kids will steal from each other, when they *aren’t* looking and when they *are*.
 - c. they’ll steal with stealth and outright. It’s a part of human nature.
 9. During the LA riots, I remember watching the news and seeing a camera crew that had set up outside a Fedco that had been over-run by the mob.
 - a. hundreds of people were coming out of the store with arms and shopping carts full of goods.
 - b. clothes, jewelry, even home appliances were being carted off by the thieves.
 - c. the reporter dared to ask some of them how they could justify their theft.
 - d. the answer of most of them was – “Why not – everyone else is doing it!” then they would just point over their shoulder at all the other thieves hauling off their stuff.
 10. Many of us in this room have been the *victims* of theft – probably most of us have, in one way or another.
 - a. I’ll never forget the time when I lived in Anaheim that I came home from work to discover my apartment had been burglarized. It’s hard to express the sense of violation I felt.
 - b. for many of us here today, our vehicles have been broken into.
 - c. where we work has been burglarized.
 - d. this building has been broken into and things stolen.
 - e. cars have been broken into right here in our own parking lot while we’re holding services – so we have security patrols & surveillance cameras.
 - f. people even steal from the bookstore and take items from the kitchen, the children’s resource room, and the sound equipment!
 11. Stealing from church! What are they THINKING?
 - a. really, we don’t have to go far to answer that.

- b. all we have to do is look in, and we'll see the *bentness* toward theft.

C. "Little" Thefts

1. We may be *repulsed* by the idea of stealing from a *church*, but *excuse* theft when it's more subtle.
 - a. "Not me," you say. "I'd never steal. It's a sin!"
 - b. okay – how about this –
 - 1) Do you report ALL of your income to the IRS when it comes tax-time?
 - 2) When you come back into the US from abroad, do you declare all the items Customs demands?
 - 3) When you use credit and incur debt, do you do so with a sincere desire to repay, or to avoid payment?
 - 4) When you borrow something that belongs to another, do you return it in a timely and complete manner;
 - a) the eggs or sugar you *borrowed* from that neighbor – did you pay it back?
 - b) that book you borrowed from your friend or the library, did you return it in the same condition?
 - c) that tool you borrowed, did you get it back to the owner in good repair and ready to use?
 - d) those videos from the video store – did they get back, or do you have to avoid going to that store because they have your picture at the counter with a bill of a couple hundred dollars you owe?
 - 5) Are you ripping off welfare when you could be working?
 - 6) Is there pirated or illegal software on your computer?
 - 7) Do you steal time from your employer by calling in sick when you're not or returning late from breaks?
 - 8) Do you steal productivity from your employer by sloppy and lazy work?
 - 9) Do you pilfer supplies from work: how about computer time on personal projects?
 - 10) If you're a manager, do you steal from your employees by failing to pay them a proper wage for the work they do?
 - 11) Do you plagiarize?
 - 12) Do you cheat?
 - 13) Do you steal from another's reputation through gossip & innuendo?
 - 14) Do you steal from God by with-holding from Him the tithe, as it says in Malachi 3:8
 - c. theft takes many forms: This list shows just how prone to thievery human nature is.
2. This list of "little thefts" many people justify.
 - a. oh – in principle, and as an abstract we *decry* stealing!
 - b. we readily admit people *ought not steal* – and mean that *others* shouldn't.
 - c. **YOU** shouldn't steal – and specially, from me or mine.
 - d. but when it comes to me, well, it's usually pretty easy for me to rationalize *my* little crimes.
 - 1) it seems so small and inconsequential, specially when my theft isn't from some *person* but from an *institution*.
 - 2) besides, everyone does it! It's expected, normal, permissible even!
 - e. (???) because everyone does it – does that make it right?
 - f. Is it true that everyone steals? I can think of at least One who doesn't – His name is Jesus, and He is my Master and Lord who has the right and authority to tell me what to do. And He says – "No stealing!"
14. When I rationalize my sin of theft, I am shooting my character in the foot.
 - a. every sin, no matter how petty or insignificant it may appear in the eyes of the world, degrades my character and moral health.
 - b. it's the *little* compromises piling up that develop within me the ethical inertia toward *greater & greater* compromise.
 - c. they increase velocity and force with each additional theft, each new trampling of our

- conscience.
- d. the CEO who embezzles \$14 million of people's retirement money doesn't wake up one morning after a lifetime of sterling ethical and virtuous morality and abscond with the funds.
 - e. he does so after a lifetime of smaller thefts and more meager compromises of his integrity.
3. So let me ask you – what's your ethical direction today; what's your moral inertia? Is it toward God or the World, holiness or sin, heaven or hell?
 4. Are you a thief? Are you a coveter?
 5. In preparing this message I was convicted by the rather loose attitude I had adopted toward the programs on my computer.
 - a. I had to delete 2 of them because they didn't belong to me.
 - b. I went through my collection of music to see if there was anything improperly duplicated.
 - c. I ransacked my memory to see if there was anything borrowed I've neglected to return.

D. Don't Steal. Don't Covet.

1. The 8th Commandment is straightforward – “Don't steal!”
2. It bans any and all forms of taking from another by stealth or force, whether that force be physical violence or social pressure.
3. It even precludes theft by civil government.
4. In order for theft to be *possible*, there must be a prior principle of personal property which is considered by God to be *sacred*.
5. This means collective socialism and Marxism find no basis whatsoever in scripture because they deny the right of individuals to own private property.
6. In such systems, the state owns and controls everything.
7. But we mustn't over-react and conclude that *pure capitalism* is the God-approved model for economics.
 - a. capitalism which is uniformed and unregulated by Biblical ethics and Christian virtue ends up becoming nothing more than *crass materialism*.
 - b. such a humanistic system becomes a convenient excuse for violating the 10th commandment's prohibition of coveting, and it does so by *sanctifying greed!*
8. A *Biblically-informed* economic philosophy is neither communist, socialist, nor capitalist. It's Stewardist!
9. Stewardship ought to be the Christian's economic system!
10. Biblical Stewardship recognizes that everything belongs, not to the State, nor to individuals, but to GOD!
 - a. and God, in His infinite wisdom has assigned to each person precisely what is appropriate at that point in their life.
 - b. along with that present allotment and portion, God also gives the capacity of *future increase* –
 - c. so that each of us might learn the point & lesson of *faithfulness*, which is a crucial part of stewardship.
 - d. In 1 Cor. 4:2 Paul says –

It is required in stewards that one be found faithful.
11. The lesson is this – as we're content and faithful where we are right now, using what God has given us in a virtuous and ethical way, investing it as He directs, then we'll see a return which *increases* our capacity.
 - a. think of how many parables Jesus told to illustrate this very thing.
 - 1) there's the parable of the talents.
 - 2) and the parable of the soils to name just 2.
 - b. stewardship means to be content where we are, trusting God to give what's needed, not what is “greeded” and that as we live faithfully today, tomorrow's capacity will increase.
12. Theft & covetousness are a denial of stewardship.
13. And really, they are accusations *against God!*

- a. they're tacit *denials* of His wisdom and faithfulness.
 - b. they're *discontent*, saying that we want more or other than what God in His wisdom has given us.
 - c. *and*, they're a disabling of another's ability to be faithful as a steward of their property, because we took what God gave *them*!
14. Covetousness is the motive behind most theft.
- a. it's the desire for *more*, not just a specific thing.
 - b. at first, when we're young, we think that if we just had this or that, *then* we'd be happy; satisfaction would finally be ours.
 - c. "Ah, the sweet life – when I get _____."
 - d. we get it, and for a time, we're satisfied, it seems. But the satisfaction never lasts.
 - e. so we set our sights on some new thing and the cycle starts all over again.
 - f. as we get older, the cycle time shortens until we arrive at the place where it isn't this or that which lures us, but *more* of this or that.
 - g. and then, it's simply **More!**
 - h. when John D. Rockefeller was the richest man in the world, someone asked him how much money was enough. He replied, "Just a little bit more."
15. The *essence* of covetousness, which is spelled out in the 10th Commandment, is discontent with *my life*.
- a. I want my neighbor's house.
 - b. I want his wife. I want her family.
 - c. I want his business. I want her stuff.
 - d. really – I want *his life* - her lifestyle.
 - e. covetousness, says, "I hate my life!"
 - 1) "God, you dealt me a bad hand and I want to throw in my cards."
 - 2) "I want to be like _____!"
16. Discontent is blasphemy!

III. CONCLUSION

A. Your Situation

1. Your situation may not be comfortable, in fact, it may be downright painful.
 - a. but it's important to ask why.
 - b. are you where you are because of poor choices, yours or others?
 - c. it may be that you're the victim of criminal action or simply adverse circumstances that have combined to make life difficult for you.
2. Whatever your circumstance or condition today, whether comfort or need, the call upon you is still the same – to be a good steward right now, and right where you are.
3. Seek contentment by trusting in the goodness & faithfulness of God.
4. Then be faithful right now with whatever you *do* have.
5. Stop looking *at* or *for* what you *lack* – Give **thanks** for what you have!