

Why We Need the Police
The Eighth Commandment
Exodus 20:1-21

The story is told of a parking lot sale that took place in Long Island, New York. Everyone brought his or her craft items to buy, trade, and sell. One of the area farmers brought in a whole string of game birds. He had tied a string around one leg of each of the birds tied in such a way that all were controlled by a one stick held by the farmer.

He had trained the birds to walk very dutifully in a circle so the buyers could see them before they became lunch or dinner. Luckily for the birds a Hindu priest appeared upon the scene. Since the Hindus respect all of life, he purchased the birds and instructed the owner to set them free.

The farmer said, "Are you sure?" The Hindu priest said, "Yes please cut all the strings and set them free." The farmer said, "Okay, they belong to you," and the farmer cut the strings. Much to the surprise of the Hindu priest all the birds did with their new-found freedom was to march around again in a circle.

The Hindu priest clapped his hands to shoo them away. And they did was to fly away - five feet away, and begin to march around in a circle. The birds, which had been rescued by the priest and set free, continued to be trapped in a past pattern of behavior and tradition.

Almighty God, through his servant Moses, rescued and delivered his people from the harsh bondage and slavery of Egypt and the Pharaoh. To be sure his people made the most of their freedom, God gave them a plan, a code, to ensure they didn't repeat and internalize what had happened to them in Egypt.

We've seen so far in our study of the Ten Commandments how the respect of God and God's name deeply develops our understanding and respect for life and people. Today, with Commandment #8, we see that we also must respect property that belongs to other people.

To steal is not an isolated event. It's a reflection of character and commitment. In this new Promised Land the Israelites were being led to, attitudes and actions were to be disciplined not to serve man's end, but to serve the way and will of God.

The people had lived in utter poverty in Egypt. Now the hope of prosperity was looming on the horizon for them. They had to be sure that they didn't exchange one form of slavery for another. They had to be sure they would rule themselves differently than they had been ruled under Pharaoh.

To build a godly nation required a godly people. Government cannot manufacture morality; it can only manage the morality we allow to exist. Somebody or something else must prime the pump to bring out clean water, attitudes, and actions.

Until recently, every candidate has promised to put more police on the streets of America to make us safe and deter crime. The current mantra to defund the Police is foolish – like a dentist handing out candy as an incentive to get children to brush their teeth.

Police forces can be a deterrent against crime, but they can't deal with the root cause of the wrongdoing which is the inward character of a man or woman. The need for the 10th commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," is as relevant now as it was when Moses first gave it—maybe even more so.

Years ago there was a book written titled, *The Day That America Told The Truth*. It was a most revealing and painful account of the social values and attitudes that now shape and direct our American character. It provided a challenging but needed wake-up call.

At Drew University in Madison, New Jersey--a university comprised of a Graduate School, an Undergraduate school and a School of Theology--it was discovered that more theological books were stolen, checked out illegally, or had pages ripped out than any of the other books on the campus.

Let me share three stories. One day a certain husband said to his wife, "You will not believe what the guest on the third floor did last week." They operated a bed and breakfast establishment. He said the guest had stolen four of their nice fluffy white towels. The wife said, "The nerve of such people. Which ones did they steal?" He said, "The ones with "New York Hilton" written on them."

Perhaps you heard the story of the man from Shenandoah who wrote to the I.R.S. office in Philadelphia: "I have been having a great deal of trouble sleeping. My doctor said that nothing is wrong other than being plagued by the guilt of not paying my taxes. Please find a check for \$1,000.00. If I still can't sleep in 7 days I'll send the other half."

Last one. A very rich young Wall Street broker falls in love with an attractive actress. Before he asks her to marry him, he hires an investigator to check on her reputation and friends. He never meets the investigator face-to-face, and the investigator does not know that he's a Wall Street broker. About a month later he receives the report on his girlfriend.

The actress has an unblemished past and wonderful reputation. The investigator's only note of concern was that she had been seen around town lately with a rich young Wall Street broker whose business practices and principles are highly questionable.

This commandment about not stealing is as much for us as it is for others. It's very tough to be an ethical and honest person in America today, especially in business and politics. For some it's hard to take the road less traveled, to cut free and live different patterns of behavior and action. However, by God's grace it can be done.

I like what M. Scott Peck wrote in his book *The Road Less Traveled*: "Again and again I have emphasized that the process of spiritual growth is an effortful and difficult one. This is because it is conducted against a natural resistance, against a natural inclination to keep things the way they were, to cling to the old maps and old ways of doing things, to take the easy path."

I'm thankful that the Bible is honest about its characters. We know that stealing took place in the Bible. Jacob stole his brother's birthright. It was a major and serious concern then and so it is today.

Are you aware that supermarket grocery stores and convenience stores lose about \$8 billion worth of items last year through theft: 40% was from customers; 60% was from the inside. The mark-up to recover that loss is between 15% to 20% of our total bill.

The 8th commandment is still needed to help us make life choices that honor God and build a just world. May our words and witness in the world not be tarnished by our behavior when no one is looking, and may all that we do reflect the fruits of our walk with God. Amen.