

STUDY 3 - DON'T STEAL

Commandment 8: 'Do not steal.' (Exodus 20:17)

Theft is enormously widespread, occurring for many reasons and in many ways. It is linked with the two commandments we have discussed earlier. Theft occurs where coveting goes from thought to action and, if it does not involve actually lying, it almost always involves a readiness to lie. We are all affected by theft; we all condemn it in others yet it is something that we all too easily find that we have committed ourselves.

→ 1 STARTER

First, do one or both of the following:

A) Go round the group asking people to come up with the first image that comes to mind when the word *thief* is mentioned.

B) Each of the following paragraphs describes a pair of people who may (or may not) have committed theft. Each member of the group should be allocated one pair to read aloud. The others then have to decide whether or not they are guilty of theft.

- *Andy* is self-employed on a low wage and failed to declare a one hundred dollar contract to the IRS. *Annabelle* is in charge of corporate finances of a company and managed to hide nearly a million dollars of earnings from the IRS last year.
- *Bill* is a car salesman who, in order to raise the price of an old car, has had a careful paint job done to hide serious rusty patches. *Beryl* is desperate to sell her house and has failed to mention a badly leaking roof.
- *Charlene* has made an unauthorized personal copy of a software package produced by a small family firm whose profits are only a few thousand dollars a year. *Clive* has made a copy of an overpriced software package produced by a multinational firm whose profits are nearly a half a billion dollars a year.
- *Doug* owns a firm in an area of unemployment and hires people at the national minimum wage. *Denise* buys in components from a factory in the developing world for her business, knowing that the labourers there must be being paid no more than a dollar a day.
- *Ellen* created a pension scheme that wiped out the investments of many elderly people. *Ed* ran a financial scam that deprived a drug dealer of his life savings.

- Acting on the leaked news of a business takeover, *Fred* made fifty thousand on the stock market overnight. *Frances*, after twenty *years* of careful investing in *stocks*, has *just* made fifty thousand dollars.
- *Gwen* has her house robbed but by exaggerating her losses makes a profit out of the insurance claim. *George* is a builder who dumps his trash in the countryside rather than pay to dispose of it.
- *Harry* works in the corner shop and helps himself to chocolate bars when he feels like it. *Heather* owns a new supermarket that takes the corner shop's business and puts it into bankruptcy..

Not easy, is it?

Now:

A) How many different types of stealing can you come up with? How would you define theft?

Leaders Note:	A typical dictionary definition of 'to steal' would be 'to take away illegally or dishonestly something belonging to another, especially secretly and with no intention of returning it'.
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B) What is the opposite of theft?

Leaders Note:	The intention of this starter is to point out 1) that theft is extraordinarily widespread and hard to limit, 2) that there are grey areas where it is hard for us to judge, and 3) that it is extremely subtle.
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→ 2 SURGERY

Discuss at least one of the following:

1) We have become used to a high level of theft in our society. If all theft ended today what changes would we be able to make in how we live? How much time, effort, money and worry would we save?

2) Who has been strongly tempted to steal something but resisted? Why were you tempted? Was it a hard temptation to fight?

→ 3 STUDY

This is divided into an Old and a New Testament part.

The Old Testament

A) Read Psalm 24:1 and Leviticus 25:23.

- Who owns everything?
- What status does that give us?
- Do we actually own anything?
- How does that affect our attitude to what we call our possessions?

B) Read Exodus 20: 15.

- Why, in a rural culture existing close to poverty level, is theft so serious?
- What are the effects of theft within a community? Why would it be vital that theft did not occur within the Israelites?

C) 'Theft' covers many things. Have different people read out the following verses. After each one is read out ask yourselves a) What type of theft is being condemned? b) What would an equivalent modern example be?

- Exodus 22:25-27
- Leviticus 19: 13
- Deuteronomy 19:14
- Isaiah 10:1-2
- Amos 5:10
- Amos 8:4-6

What is it about theft that seems to displease God so much?

D) Read Exodus 22: 1-6. The detailed laws given here represent examples of how the principle of this commandment was to be worked out in practice.

- In verses 1-4, what guidelines (exacting revenge, deterring future offenders or making restitution, etc.) seem to be used to determine the appropriate penalty for theft?
- Elsewhere in the Near East at this time (and, in places, today) theft had a penalty of death or mutilation attached (e.g. lopping off a pickpocket's hands, etc.). The Old Testament took a different view on property crime. What does this suggest about how God views the relative value of property and people?

- Verses 5-6 cover property loss caused by carelessness; what we might call 'theft by accident'. What did these rules try and achieve?

E) The Old Testament laws were not just 'against theft' but also aimed to create a society in which the necessity to steal in order to survive was eliminated. Read Deuteronomy 15:1-11.

- What attitudes were the Israelites to have to the poor (verses 8,9,10)?
- What was to happen to loans at the end of seven years (verse 1)?
- From Leviticus 25 we find that even if someone had to sell their ancestral land, it had to be returned in the year of Jubilee (at the end of the forty-ninth year). What effect on Israelite society would these rules on the seventh and forty-ninth years have had?

F) The Old Testament also celebrates and praises personal generosity. Read Job 31:16-21. Here Job, afflicted by suffering, protests his innocence.

- Why is there the emphasis here (already seen) on widows and orphans?

Leaders Note:	Exactly how the loan system worked in ancient Israel is not known. The key point seems to be that this law was a limiting mechanism to stop the poverty spiral where the poor got poorer and poorer.
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- If Job was living today, what would he say?

G) Read Proverbs 30:7-9.

- What does the writer ask God for?
- What is his concern about wealth?
- What is his concern about poverty? Why does it insult or dishonor Gods' name?
- Is this a prayer that we should pray?

H) Read Malachi 3:6-12.

- How had the people of Israel cheated God?
- Who were the losers?
- How can we cheat God?

The New Testament

In the New Testament, all theft is treated as being wrong.

A) Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

- Who are thieves linked with here?
- What is the bad news of this passage for thieves (v.10)?
- What is the good news of this passage for thieves (v.11)?

B) Theft in some shape or form is a particular attraction when we feel that things aren't fair. Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-8.

- What was apparently happening in the Corinthian church?
- What attitudes seem to have been common?
- According to verse 7, what alternative attitude would Paul prefer?
- On this basis, how should we respond to an injustice against us?

C) A common question is, 'What should someone do who was financially dishonest but who has now become a Christian?' In Luke 19:1-10 we see an example of this. Here Zacchaeus has come into a right relationship with Christ.

- How do Zacchaeus' changed priorities show in his attitude to his wealth?
- How do his changed priorities show in his attitude to any former stealing?
Note: Zacchaeus would have taken a commission on any taxes he collected.
- While there is no reason to treat the percentages involved here as binding (after all, the rich man in Luke 18: 18-30 was asked to give away everything!) what principles can we learn about our attitudes to wealth and to our dealing with past wrongdoings?

D) Read Ephesians 4:28.

- What is the converted thief to stop doing?
- What is he or she to do instead?
- How, according to this verse, is the general outlook of the Christian to be different from that of the non-Christian?

The New Testament teaching on stealing goes further than simply condemning the wrong way of acquiring wealth. Jesus, in particular, talks much about the misuse of wealth. It also repeatedly encourages generosity.

E) Read Luke 14:12-14.

- Why does Jesus consider that being kind to those in our own social Circle doesn't count as generosity?
- Who are we to be kind to instead?
- How could this work out in practice today?

F) Read John 12:1-7.

- What was Mary's attitude to wealth?
- What was Judas' attitude to wealth?
- How can we imitate Mary?

G) Read Acts 4:32-37.

- How did the early church seek to live out Jesus' teachings on poverty?
- What prompted them to sell land or property (verses 34-35)?

Leaders Note:

This does not appear to have involved the giving up of all private property (see Acts 5:4) but rather a willing sharing of all possessions and resources as needed.

H) Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-11.

- What characterized the giving of the Macedonian churches?
- Does Paul order the Corinthians to give in a similar manner? Why not?
- How does Jesus set an example for our giving?
- If giving is the focus of our lives is theft likely to be an issue?

→ 4 SUMMARY

Think about stealing

- Why do we want to steal?
- If we steal, what does that say about our relationship with God?
- We may be careful about not stealing money or property from our employers, but do we steal our labor from them? Do we arrive late, leave dream or just cut corners on what we are paid to do?
- Are we honest in all our financial transactions? Bearing in mind all the varied ways that there are to steal, how can we be sure that we are innocent?
- If we have stolen, what should we do about it?

Think about generosity

- What does it mean to be truly generous?
- How is being generous something that ought to be natural and appropriate for someone who is a child of God?
- How would a policy of rich generosity affect our church life?

Discussion

We need to think how this commandment is applied. Try and look at a couple of examples below.

1) It would be possible to use this commandment to defend the right of the rich to keep their property and wealth. But is that the correct use of this commandment?

2) In 1840 the French social reformer Pierre-Joseph Proudhon wrote that 'property is theft'. Is this the view of the Bible? If private property isn't theft, then what is it?

3) Theft is a crime against the community and the Bible treats the concept of community more seriously than most of us do. Can theft and a real community coexist? Would you feel able to easily share your possessions and your life with someone who was a thief?

So what?

At the end of this study:

- What has challenged you most?
- In what areas are you most prone to breaking this commandment?
- What do you need to change?
- What do you really want to work on?

→ 5 STEPPING OUT

Practical suggestions

- Can you look at everything that you have (including your bank balance) and say, 'This is not mine, it has been lent me by God'?
- If we believed we were accountable to God for things in our possession would we seek to have more of them or less of them?
- How can you be more generous?

Further study

1) Remind yourselves of the first sin (Genesis 2:15-17 and 3:1-6). We have already seen in Studies 1 and 2 how coveting and lying was involved with this.

- In what ways was theft also involved?
- Given God's generous nature (Adam and Eve could eat anything else in the garden), why was this a serious crime?

2) Read Leviticus 25:24-28. What would this piece of legislation prevent?

3) In the Old Testament, one form of theft is viewed as a capital offence. Read Deuteronomy 24:7. Given that Israel was a nation brought out from captivity in Egypt by God, why do you think this crime is treated with particular severity?

4) Read Joshua 7:1-26. God had commanded the Israelites that, as they took over the Promised Land, the pagan towns should be set apart to him by their destruction.

- Why was Achan's theft so serious?
- We often think of sins like theft as affecting only the individual concerned. Is this the case here?
- If God had ignored Achan's sin, what do you think would have been the moral effects on the Israelites?

A New Testament parallel to this is to be found in Acts 5:1-10 with the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

5) Read Jeremiah 7:8-15. Jeremiah is prophesying at a time when the nation of Judah is under threat from foreign armies.

- According to verse 9, what sins are the people committing?
- How do they make matters worse (v.10)?
- What attitude do they have towards the temple?
- How does God view their trust in the security of the temple and their worship there?
- By this time Shiloh had been destroyed for centuries. What is God's warning to the nation through Jeremiah? (Note: In 587 Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the temple was destroyed.)
- Read Mark 11:15-17. Why, six hundred years later, did Jesus repeat Jeremiah's words?

6) Read Matthew 25:31-46. This passage talks about the great and final division of the righteous and the wicked.

- How have the righteous used their wealth?
- How have the wicked used their wealth?

7) Read Romans 13:8-10.

- If we steal from someone, what attitude do we have to them?
- If we love our neighbor as ourselves, can we rob them?

8) Read Philippians 2:3-11.

- What rights did Jesus have?
- What was his attitude to those rights?
- Why did he give them up?
- If we had such an attitude, how would it affect the likelihood of us being involved in theft?

9) Read James 5:1-4.

- Is James here opposing wealthy people in general? What is he condemning?
- What will happen to their wealth in this life? What use will it serve in the next life?

Questions to think about

- It is claimed that Robin Hood 'stole from the rich to give to the poor'. Is this a justifiable defense for theft?
- What would the prophets denounce in our society today?
- Could we implement some of the Old Testament ideas of not lending interest and not owning property forever, today?
- Isn't our destruction of the environment simply theft from future generations?