

Joshua 6:1-21 7:1 & 19-21 Do not Steal. Exodus 20:15

Are you a thief? Do you need to be forgiven your stealing? Do you need the Holy Spirit to change your heart and your character to help you stop stealing? Do you want to live a life pleasing to God, a life of thanksgiving?

Today we listen to a life giving word from the Spirit of God. God says to us “do not steal.” Do not steal. If we want to experience the wonders of a deep loving relationship with God, if we want to experience harmony and peace and love in our relationships with others, in other words paradise - God says, “do not steal”. Do not take what belongs to others. Do not take what belongs to God. In other words do what you can for the good and protection of others, be generous in promoting the well being of others. Do what you can to promote community, be generous in promoting the mission of God. Do not steal.

Stealing has a devastating effect on human community and human relationships, and even on our relationship with God. And as we have discovered in the last couple of years, stealing has a devastating effect on the economy. Like the other sins, stealing stirs up anger, and hatred and revenge, and greed; and so destroys relationships. Has someone ever stolen from you? How do feel? How do you feel toward those wall street traders who walked off with millions and massive mansions by pilfering the pensions of plain people? Stealing stirs up mistrust and possessiveness. Stealing makes us want to hide what we have, and hoard it. Stealing make us stingy. It corrupts and poisons the heart. And more often than not stealing leads to undermining and compromising and even opposing the mission of God and leads to death. What begins by just taking one little cookie, or one messily dollar could end up killing the life of a brother or destroying a church.

Israel was on the verge of entering the promised land, their paradise. God told them that he would give them everything in this wonderful land flowing with milk and honey, a glorious place to call home, to raise a family, to build a business, to make difference in the world. A wonderful land to experience community with God and brothers and sisters, to be nation of priests for the world. And to show that they were a people who belonged to God, God claimed the first fruits of their lives for his mission and for his glory. Always, the first fruits of everything were devoted to God. In Exodus 23:15 God says to his people, “do not steal” “No one is to appear before me empty handed. Bring the best of the first fruits of your lives to the house of the Lord your God.” The first born of the family was devoted to God. The first fruits of the crops were devoted to God. The first fruits of the flocks and herds, the first fruits of the winnings in war were devoted to God. The first fruits of their wages were devoted to God. The first fruits of their time and talents were devoted to God. It was a tithe, an offering of thanksgiving to express that they loved God above all and their neighbor as themselves. That God has the first place in their lives.

Jericho was the first fruit of the land. As God gave them Jericho, God would give every city as their possession. It was a matter of trust. God first. Do not worry. Seek first God's kingdom and his ways of doing things and everything you need and want will be given you as well. And so Jericho was devoted to God. All its gold, silver, and the valuables of Canaanite culture belonged to God. Jericho was a sacred tithe that was to go into God's treasury for the building of the temple, the upkeep of the church, and the provisions for the priests and pastors. It was devoted dedicated for the mission and purposes of God.

And God says in Malachi 3:10, when you bring the whole tithe to my house, I will throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out the blessings of God so that there is not enough room to contain them all. When you bring the whole tithe you will be source of blessing to all the nations, these blessings will just flow out of you. So do not compromise in this giving of the first fruits. This love gift for God. Do not steal in this matter. If you rob God of his tithe, of this love gift, if you take stuff that does not belong to you, if you steal, you place yourselves under a curse, you invite disaster. Failure, and brokenness, and grief, and economic meltdowns, and housing market collapses and death will follow.

On the verge of entering the promised land, on the verge of enjoying all the abundant paradise blessings of God, Achan took some of the devoted treasures belonging to God, belonging to the people of God. In 7:20 Achan says, It's true. I have sinned. In Jericho I saw all those devoted things. The beautiful clothing, the thousands of bar of silver and gold and other precious jewelry and the bronze tools and the latest electronic gadgets. I saw the abundance of wealth and I coveted them and took some. I took only one robe, I took only a few shekels of silver and even less of gold for myself and hid them in my tent as my own possession. I have stolen what belonged to another.

And God was not pleased and a curse fell, a deadly virus infected them, damaged their DNA – a curse fell on them, not just on Achan and his family, but on all the people and even on the mission of God. When Achan stole many people died as a result.

Why do we steal? Fear, worry, greed, selfishness, disobedience, to get even, to get ahead, just for the thrill of it, business is business, everybody is doing it, to prove myself, desperation, ignorance.

When do we steal? When we take something that does not belong to us, like money, property, dignity, reputation or rights. When we download songs programs movies illegally. When we plagiarize. When we under report our income and pay less taxes. When we participate in the underground economy to avoid paying taxes and fees. When we sell inferior products or do inferior work at inflated prices. When we vote no on taxes that improve the education of children. When we take things from work or shop lift. (70% of all employees steal from their company loosing up to 10 billion dollars a year).

Gambling; buying cheap clothing, shoes, coffee produced by sweat shops or slave or child labor. Bribes, kick backs, gossip, dumping trash in someone else trash bin or some vacant property, not doing the work you get paid for; not paying your tithe, your 10 % or more to the church; not using your god-given talents, gifts and time. Not trusting God but always worrying about that you get something and you feel good and care less about others. Voting no for taxes that help the homeless, the orphan, and the illegal alien within your community. Using illegal labor and paying below minimum wages. Taking one little cookie or one messily dollar.

That's how it started with Judas Iscariot. He was a dedicated follower and disciple of Jesus. He quickly established himself as a leader and became the treasurer of the mission of God. And as he saw the treasures of heaven flowing into the mission of Jesus he began taking a dollar here and a dollar there for his own use. After all he deserved it. He worked so hard and kept the purse so diligently. But that pilfering of the purse, that insignificant stealing, in the mission of Jesus, began to harden his heart and compromise everything he was taught. And in the end he betrayed Jesus and sold him out for thirty pieces of silver. When Judas stole at least two people died.

Are you a thief? Do you need to be forgiven your stealing? Do you need the Holy Spirit to change your heart and your character to help you stop stealing? Do you want to live a life pleasing to God, a life of thanksgiving?

This past week the Law of God, this word of God, "Do Not Steal" did what it is supposed to do and does so well. I did some soul searching and I realized I am not immune. The virus of greed and self doubt and self interest has infected in me too. It was easy for me to list all the ways other people steal. All I had to do was research my own heart. I am no better than an Achan or a Judas. I have stolen in the past, I have skimmed on my tithes and I continue to feel entitled to things and take things that do not belong to me. I'm not always that concerned with my neighbor's good, and often stingy in sharing with those in need. I am somewhat of a recovering thief who is prone to relapsing any moment and does relapse again and again. It is true I need the strength of a higher power to keep me from falling into my old ways, my selfish ways. I need God's forgiveness in this area of my life. And I need the power of the Holy Spirit to change my heart. To change the ways I look at things and measure things and value things. I need the Holy Spirit to change even how I value God. And I realize I deserve the punishment thieves deserve.

The good news is that Jesus was punished in my place. He took the curse of thievery, and the punishment of stealing on himself in my place. In the trial of Jesus the bible tells us, Pilate found Jesus innocent and wanted to let Jesus go, but the people insisted that Pilate let Barabbas go instead. Barabbas was proven guilty as a robber and a thief. He was let go and Jesus died in his place. An exchange took place. Barabbas means son of the father. We are all sons and daughters of God the father. We are guilty sinners and Jesus

died in our place. When Jesus was crucified he was hung between two thieves and he died as a thief.

Hanging on cross one of the thieves said to the other, “Don’t you fear God? We are under the same sentence. We are punished justly, for we are getting what our stealing deserved. But this man, Jesus has done nothing wrong.” Then this thief turned to Jesus and prayed to him. Jesus remember me when you come into you kingdom. Jesus remember me. And Jesus said “Truly I tell you, today you will enter with me the promised land - paradise.

That is the power of forgiveness. That is the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the power of the holy Spirit we can enter into New life. A life heal Through the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus changes our hearts and makes us new.

When we set our minds on the reality of what happened in the cross the Holy Spirit kills the deadly viruses that infect our hearts. The Holy Spirit even repairs the damaged DNA that causes greed and fear and feelings of entitlement that result in taking the devoted things of God and others. When we set our minds and our hearts on Jesus, and realize he is Lord the Holy Spirit takes the practices of the old self and clothes us with a new self. With kindness, compassion, and a deep contentment with who I am and what I have. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus I no longer need to steal. I am healed. When I let the word of Christ and peace of Christ and the forgiveness of Christ rule my heart, when I let the word of God dwell richly in me I am healed and enabled to live a life that pleases God. A life of thanksgiving and praise and glory to God.

Can you imagine a church and a community and a people where stealing is no more. Where everyone comes into the presence of God with their hands full with the first fruits of this lives. Where all the people bring the whole tithe into the house of the Lord and do what ever they can for the good of others. Where everyone sells property and possessions to give to everyone in need; where they all have everything in common and are fully content in the grace of God.

Jesus remember me, Jesus remember us as you orchestrate you kingdom of paradise through the power of the Spirit.