

HAVING RESPECT FOR OTHER PEOPLE'S PROPERTY

[You shall not steal]

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Exodus 20:1-17.

This is a short Commandment but it covers much. It again explores the heart attitude of selfishness. It is about 'Me' at the expense of 'You'. It is to say that you do not matter, I do. It is the absence of love for neighbour (Romans 13:8-10). The Commandment is referred to in the New Testament (see Romans 2:21; Ephesians 4:28; Titus 2:9-10). Judas is referred to as a thief (John 12:4-6). Theft often involves hypocrisy and deceit. People can smile at you as they are in the process of stealing from you. Those who steal show disregard for the desires and needs of other people. They are covetous and greedy.

1. Property is not all a bad thing.

The ownership of the land was important in the Old Testament. People who owned the land were stewards with rights (Deuteronomy 23: 24-25). The law defends the ownership of property and punishes those who take what belongs to another. Those things include land, homes, our means of living and other resources. Possessions of other people are to be treated with respect.

Abolishing property has not been successful. Public ownership where people do not feel they have such a personal stake can lead to inefficiency, waste, and carelessness. In the absence of a police force to enforce the rights of property owners, anarchy can break out as in some US cities in 2020. Communism was not a success and led to people enriching themselves illegally. Corruption was endemic.

Stealing can become a habit. People become hardened so they simply do not care about other people. A young man from West Yorkshire unwisely boasted of his car stealing exploits in songs posted on social media and incriminated himself. His words showed callous disregard to the needs of other people and boasted of his stealing prowess.

2. Stealing is personal.

Stealing is not just a matter of taking something that is not ours. It is to take something from someone else that has value to the other person. It may have been something that was very useful to them or had sentimental value. It can mean the shattering of the sense of wellbeing, peace and security of another person. It is to show total disrespect. There is no love for neighbour when people steal from them. A theft can lead to elderly

people dying sooner or the health of people declining. It shows disrespect for a person's future, their survival or security.

When people lie on their CV to get a job, they are stealing from someone who was better qualified to get the job. When people in sport do cynical tackles on opposing players and seriously injure them, they steal away that person's career. When people lie about people, they steal that person's reputation or honour. Gossip can unfairly diminish people in the eyes of others.

If we waste the time of other people, it is a form of stealing from them. If all we do is complain or talk about trivia, we steal time from those who are forced to listen to us. If we are lazy and burden other people, that is to steal from people and, in the context of the local church, it is to steal from God.

3. Property can be a god.

Property can be an idol. Getting more property makes people restless, less content, covetous. We can hog resources for ourselves and steal from people. We might deny people help and it robs us of good character. Ahab ruined himself coveting the property of Naboth. When property is our god, we become heartless, loveless, cruel and uncaring.

1 Timothy 6: 17-19 warns about the danger of greed and selfishness. 1 Corinthians 11:21-22 warns against people showing off their wealth. Instead generosity and liberality is extolled in the Bible (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). We are to be careful not to squander resources on causes that are not worthy. We are to be prayerful, out-ward facing, cheerful and positive when helping. We are to be good stewards.