

LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOUR

"CAN A MAN ROB GOD?"

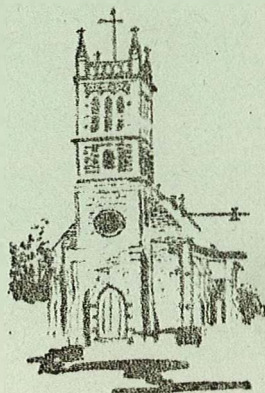
— COMMANDMENT VIII —

"Thou shalt not steal."

by

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COMMANDMENT VIII .. "CAN A MAN ROB GOD?"

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In the 20th Chapter of the Book of Exodus, Verse 15, we read "You shall not steal".

Some people in the modern world look upon the Commandments as a kind of restriction upon their freedom. But God's commandments were meant to give life, and one ought to see in the commandments that God has given, an inbuilt promise. For example when God says "Thou shalt not covet" I must not read that as if God is restricting me and saying "You mustn't covet something which belongs to somebody else". I hear the voice of God saying to me, "You don't need to covet. There's nothing that belongs to somebody else that is necessary for your life and for your liberty or for your walk with Me". There's a promise that I will never need that which belongs to somebody else, but only that which God will give me for my own.

And then when you come to look at the Commandments you find that we cannot read them just as they were given long ago. That wasn't the beginning of Law, of course, when Moses gave them. Long before that God wrote them upon the fleshy tables of men's hearts. At the same time as they were given there existed in the world commandments, in other countries, which said it was wrong to steal. Men have always known it was wrong to steal; the commandment only gave force and power to that which God had written upon the hearts of men long before. And when Jesus came He picked it up, and enriched the Law of Moses by showing what was its true meaning. He took the Commandments and showed that the real Law itself was much deeper than that which the Commandments covered (Matt. 5).

He said, "The Commandment says 'Thou shalt not kill'; but whosoever hateth his brother without a cause is already a murderer in his heart." He pushed the issue right back to the heart and the imagination. He said, "The Commandment says 'Thou shalt not commit adultery', but I say unto you, whosoever lusteth after a woman, or looketh after a woman to commit adultery, has already committed adultery in his heart." (Matt. 5:28).

Then let us look at this Commandment which speaks about

stealing. It is very interesting to note that people feel badly when they see the large-scale robberies that take place, and the more obvious stealing, especially now with the increased price of wool and the increased price of meat, cattle are being stolen. I read in a Victorian paper the other day that the Government is concerned with the increased stealing of cattle and the increased stealing of sheep. Men can read this and feel that 'that's got nothing whatever to do with me. I don't steal cattle or sheep'.

But surely there are other kinds of stealing, aren't there, that are common today? A businessman said to me, "There are only two kinds of Australians: there are those that cheat on their Income Tax, and those that don't know how." Now that isn't true, of course, but it is true enough to reveal something of the Australian way of life; somehow or other you feel you can cheat the Income Tax, which means that somebody else has to pay more, because you don't pay your due share.

Another man said to me recently, "Ah well, this tax - it makes robbers of us all. I had to say to my firm the other day: 'I want a rise, and it's no good you giving me any more money; it will all go away in taxes. Give me the free use of a car!'" That is a form of thieving. It simply means that he's getting an emolument that he's not declaring on his Income Tax form. No question about that:- God says, "You shall not steal."

Some years ago I was preaching at a Convention, and a man came to see me very troubled in heart and mind and conscience. He had been building a house; he was a Christian and he worked for a firm of building contractors. He told me in the course of the discussion that every doorknob, every bolt, every nail and screw and fitting in the house, in which he was going to live day by day, had across the years been stolen, one by one. As he went out to fit them in other people's houses he just arranged for enough so that there would be one left over at the end of the day. And then God's Spirit began to work within his heart, and he said, "What do I do now?" I said "You sit down and you make a list of it all, and you work out the prices that you know so well; and then you take the list and the prices and you go back to your boss. You cannot live in a house where things are not your own." It is a terrible thing to have in your house things that belong to other people, not because they have lent them to you but because you have no right to them, or you have been too

lazy to return them.

I was once speaking on this at a Convention, and a clergyman was there who was troubled about his bookshelf. He decided to go through it and check up on any books that belonged to somebody else. Well, he found one that belonged to me! I felt that was good preaching! The book I'd been missing for ten years came home to roost. Have you things in your home that ought not to be there? People think nothing of taking things from where they work to their home without right. The old Catechism, with all its simple ways, when it is talking about our duty towards our neighbour, picks up the command that says, 'keep your hands from picking and stealing'. The little bits of thieving that you think don't matter, matter so very much indeed.

I read recently what so-called 'sickies' cost Australia in money year by year. It has become a well-known term now, hasn't it? A man's not grateful that he's got enough energy and strength to go to work. He thinks he is doing very well - he never has any time off; he is in good health, and instead of being grateful for it he thinks, "It's about time I took a day off", and so he has a 'sickie' and gets paid for work that he doesn't do. It happens all the time as part of the built in system of relationships today. Employers feel that if they make a song about it they get into trouble; employees feel it is a kind of right. It is like the Income Tax. It is not only stealing; built into it is the element of deceit. It brings in a lie, and whatever the ordinary man in the street might feel about it, for the child of God, that which makes a lie comes from the Devil who is the father of lies. And if we tell lies, then we are 'of our father the Devil'. We don't like to think of that. Whenever the element of deceit comes in, and it nearly always does with stealing, it compounds the evil by adding another.

When the prophets in the Old Testament began to discover the Character of God Who had called Israel to be His own people, they saw that He was a Covenant-keeping God and a faithful God; a God Who was concerned with justice and with truth and with right action. They began to speak against those who oppressed the widow and the orphan; they began to speak about those who used scales that cheated, and other kinds of sharp business practices that so often exist (Deut. 25:15).

I went to a shop recently to buy a present for a friend. I found what I wanted and asked for it, saying, "I'll take this". The man looked at the price on it. I said "I'll just take the price label off, if you don't mind". So I took it off - I didn't want my friend to see what I'd paid for it. Underneath the label was the printed price - 10% less than what the new label over the top had said. Now it may be that prices had risen and he was just getting his own honest return. He looked very, very odd. He wanted to charge me the price that was on the printed form. I said "No, I'll pay the price that you wanted to sell it for." I thought I would leave him with his conscience. A few cents might do more than getting a quick bargain.

This is happening all the time. The prophets of Israel began to see that false scales and cheating were wrong. Then they began to turn to man's relationship to God, and the prophet Malachi says, "Will a man rob God?" And when you ask yourself the question you say in one sense, "How can a man rob God?" No man can be richer by robbing God - that's certain. But can a man rob God? "Yes", said the prophet, "You have robbed Me in tithes and offerings". They did not like God's words. He made quite plain the kind of things they did. They brought the wrong kind of offerings - things that they did not feel were as good as the things they kept for themselves.

The blind lamb and the one that was deformed - that was the one that they wanted to offer to God. And He said, "You've robbed me in tithes and offerings."

Now we are not under the old legal law of tithes, but the principle of the tithe is a very simple one. It is the same as the principle that runs right through the whole of the Old Testament; man was to take one day in seven and set it apart as a reminder that everything he had - that every day - belonged to God. You take an ordinary place and set it aside as a place of worship to remind you that 'the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof'. Israel was to take a tribe and set them apart as a reminder that all men belong to the Lord, and a man was to take a portion of the goods which he had, and it was not to be his portion, but God's portion; it was the first portion that he had to offer. There were other offerings as well - the first-fruits of his trees and so forth. All of these were laid down as that

which he should give to God as a reminder that all that he possessed belonged to God, and that at best he was no more than an agent. "The silver and the gold are mine", says the Lord of Hosts.

We Christians must accept this principle. The principle of the tithes was in a sense compulsory in the Old Testament. The Law was a schoolmaster to bring men to Christ; it was a teaching principle. But what is the principle of the New Testament as laid down? Quite clearly the necessity of giving is set out as plainly as can be. On the first day of the week a man shall set aside as God has prospered him. Giving is to be proportional to income. Not only do you give more if you have more, but if you have more you can give a bigger proportion of what you have as well. And then, giving has to be done not grudgingly, not out of some legal necessity, not out of some feeling of 'If I don't do this I'm going to lose out', but from the feeling that you really want to give something to God because of the blessings that God has given you. You want to take that portion and give it to Him as a reminder that you are His child, and what you have left you are going to administer wisely and carefully for His sake. It is to be given cheerfully, not extracted from you because you think you have to do it, but something which you want to do.

If you study those who give often and freely you will find that, once they have formed the habit of giving, they know the blessing that giving can bring. Also, it is to be done not only cheerfully and regularly and proportionately, but giving has to be to God. Your eye is not upon somebody else - how much do they give? What do they give? But think of the blessings that God has given to you, and give in accordance with that.

I once met a clergyman in Africa who had tears in his eyes, as he was reading a letter, and I said to him, "Why are you so sad?" He said, "They are not tears of sadness; they are tears of joy." He showed me the letter which was from his daughter who had been trained as a nurse in Mvumi Hospital. They get a small allowance from the Government as pocket money while they are doing their training. It is very small indeed. After the three or four years of training are completed, they get their first salary at the end of the first month. It was now the end of the second month, and the girl's second salary. The letter read

something like this:

"Dear Father, as I think of all that you and mother have done for me, I want you to take this pay - the first I have to give you. I couldn't give you last month's pay, because I wanted to give the first-fruits of my labour to God. And now this is the next, and I want to give it to you."

So after all those years of training she waited till the end of the third month before she took something for herself. You could see in the man's face the sense of gratitude to God - not for the money that was there, but for what God had wrought in the heart of his daughter.

Giving is of the very nature of the Gospel of Christ. The only words of our Lord that are in the New Testament, that are not recorded elsewhere in the Gospels, come in the Acts - the words recorded by Paul when he says, "Remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'". The very important principle is that blessing is in giving, not in getting, reversing the world's idea of things.

'Shall a man rob God?' Shall he take away that which he ought to give to God and wanted for himself? Can that mean blessing? How this reverses the great Divine Order, for Jesus who was rich, for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich. And so the old Commandment of long ago which says, 'Thou shalt not steal' - means not only 'Thou shalt not steal from thy neighbour', but 'Thou shalt not steal from God', and you shall not steal from yourself. When a man steals he robs himself of his self-respect. He robs himself of an effective and active conscience. He robs himself of the great freedom of facing every day unashamed and unafraid, because he is right with God. And when a man looks at all that he possesses and realizes that this belongs to God, and he is but an agent with it, not only will he not want to steal, but he will find that he is free. He is free because the fear that other men have and the problems that worry them will be no problem to him. When his Tax Return is due he won't be like some men who cry at the amount they have to pay. He will say, "After all, this is the law of the land, and I am told to obey the law of the land, and it's God's money." So you write the cheque with a clear and open

heart. It won't trouble him at all; it will pose no problem to him of any kind. If he is a Christian he will pay all he ought to pay, and if he is a good steward of the money God has entrusted to him, he will pay no more than he ought to pay, so that he can have the rest for the work which he should do for God, and use it wisely and well.

"Thou shalt not steal" - small or great; from Government, from man, from God; for if you do you will not be the kind of man that God meant you to be. In the last resort, you have got to live with your own conscience. What a wonderful thing it is to feel that all you have belongs to another, and you are being as good a steward of it as you could possibly be. There is freedom in not possessing that which belongs to another.

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