

The Ten Commandments in the 21st Century - 6

Taking What is Not Yours

The Seventh Commandment: You Shall Not Commit Adultery

What exactly is adultery? It means having sexual relations with someone who is married to someone else. In ancient times this also included a man or woman who was engaged to be married, because that promise was as binding as the actual marriage. That is why Joseph – who was then only engaged to Mary – decided he should divorce her when he discovered she was expecting a baby he knew was not his. Once he understood that the baby was a miracle and would be the son of God, of course he changed his mind.

Adultery was always a very serious offence. 4,000 years ago, Abraham came to the country of the Philistines and pretended Sarah was his sister, not his wife. She was taken into the palace of the king of the Philistines, but God intervened so that nothing bad happened:

God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, "Indeed you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife" (Genesis 20:3).

Notice here that the punishment for adultery was death. This was also the punishment under the Law of Moses:

The man who commits adultery with another man's wife, he who commits adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress, shall surely be put to death (Leviticus 20:10).

God considers adultery as very serious. In the beginning, He introduced marriage as a union between a man and a woman that was so close



that they would become 'one flesh'. The sexual act is an expression of that unity. To involve a third party breaks that precious bond. In Bible times (and often today) marriage began with a solemn vow between the man and the woman that they would remain together for life. To break this promise is very serious in God's eyes. He always keeps His promises, and He expects us to keep ours.

Modern Morality

What does Jesus say about adultery? As we have seen before, he argues

that we should go beyond the provisions of the Law of Moses.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27–8).

In Jesus' view, to look at someone else's spouse with a desire to commit adultery is just as bad as the actual deed. We have to stop the unlawful desire in the first place. The Apostle Paul is equally strict on this subject. He says that people who regularly commit adultery will not enter the Kingdom of God (see 1 Corinthians 6:9–10).

We live in a world where adultery takes place all too often – they call it 'having an affair'. We see it in the media, in films, in novels and in plays, and in the lives of many ordinary people. But it is wrong. God hates it, and serial adulterers will be banned from His Kingdom.

The society of the First Century was no different, especially in big ports like Corinth where there were many sailors and prostitutes. Paul says some of the Corinthian Christians had been like that before they became Christians. But their old sins had been washed away in the water of baptism, and now they must lead a pure and holy life (1 Corinthians 6:11). The same applies today. If we are baptised, then all our old sins are forgiven, and from then on we must keep ourselves free from immorality.

What will happen if we commit adultery after we are baptised? Does that mean we are banned from the Kingdom? The answer is that the other sins in Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 6:11

will also ban us from the Kingdom if they represent our way of life. Drunkards, thieves and extortionists are no better and no worse than adulterers. God is merciful, so if we do sin in this way, but repent and ask forgiveness (and do not continue in that sin!) He will forgive us because of the sacrifice of Jesus.

The Eighth Commandment: You Shall Not Steal

To steal is to take away something that belongs to someone else and to use it as yours. It may be money, as when a burglar breaks into your apartment and empties your purse. It may be possessions, as when you are stopped in the street and someone demands your mobile phone.



It can also be something else, such as time. If your employer pays you to work ten hours a day but when he is out of the office and you take a two-hour lunch break so that you can watch football, that is stealing.

You can steal from a person, or you can steal from an organisation. If you make a false statement when you are filling in the form for the Government's tax collector so that you pay less tax than you should, that is stealing. If you jump over the barrier at the railway station and get on the train without a

ticket, you are stealing from the railway company.

God hates stealing in any form. He insists that we respect the rights of ownership of other people. He is so insistent on this point that the Law of Moses says if you find someone else's property that they have obviously lost, you have a duty by law to keep it safe and to return it at the earliest opportunity (see Deuteronomy 22:1-3). Even if it was your enemy's property, you must give it back to him:

If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again (Exodus 23:4).

It is interesting to see how the Law of Moses punished a thief. In our society, a thief is usually fined or sent to prison. But in the Law, the principle was one of compensation.

If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep. If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed. If the sun has risen on him, there shall be guilt for his bloodshed. He should make full restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. If the theft is certainly found



alive in his hand, whether it is an ox or donkey or sheep, he shall restore double (Exodus 22:1-4).

If someone stole a sheep and that sheep was still on the thief's premises he repaid two sheep. But if he had killed it or sold it to someone else, he had to repay four sheep. This was a good deterrent to stop people stealing sheep.

However, there was another possibility under the Law of Moses. If someone stole something from their neighbour, afterwards they might repent and wish they had not taken it. In this case, the thief could go to the priest and confess the sin.

Notice, it was a sin, because the thief had broken the Eighth Commandment. God, who sees everything, knew all about the theft, and God was offended about it. But of course, the neighbour was also upset, having lost the possession. So the thief had to put things right with the neighbour first.

Then it shall be, because he has sinned and is guilty, that he shall restore what he has stolen, or the thing which he has extorted, or what was delivered to him for safekeeping, or the lost thing which he found, or all that about which he has sworn falsely. He shall restore its full value, add one-fifth more to it, and give it to whomever it belongs, on the day of his trespass offering (Leviticus 6:4-5).

Then the thief could go to the Tabernacle and bring the priest an offering for his sin, to put things right with God:

And he shall bring his trespass offering to the LORD, a ram without blemish from the flock, with your valuation, as a trespass offering, to the priest. So

the priest shall make atonement for him before the LORD, and he shall be forgiven for any one of these things that he may have done in which he trespasses (v6-7).

Notice the difference between this case and the one above. If the thief was caught with the stolen animal in his possession and had no intention to return it, he had to pay the owner at least twice or four times the value of the animal. If he repented and apologised of his own accord, he only had to repay one fifth extra. Thus, the Law of Moses encouraged people to repent and put things right with each other and with God.

The Law of Moses shows us that we cannot hide anything from God. He sees all that we do, and He judges us. When we take an extra hour off work, He knows about it. When we steal a pencil from the stationery cupboard, He sees and remembers.

Christians and Stealing

What does the New Testament have to say about stealing? Once more, the Apostle Paul has some advice for us. In Ephesians 4:22-24 he says when we are baptised we become new men and women. It is like going into a shop and being given a new coat. We take off our old coat and put it in the bin, and we put on the new coat.

The old coat we take off is the 'Adam, or sinful, coat'. Adam was made in the likeness of God, but in character he failed to be like God. He was a sinner. We must put on the 'Jesus coat', for Jesus was like God in character as well as appearance – we see this in verse 24.

Stealing belongs to the sinful way of life. Stealing is wrong. It hurts other

people. It takes away something that was theirs, and now they cannot enjoy it any more. They may not know who it was that stole their possession, but they are left angry and miserable, and you have been the cause of that bad feeling. In contrast, says the Apostle, when we put on the new man, the one modelled on Jesus, we have to change from *hurting* people to *helping* them.



Imagine a skilled pickpocket who has heard about Jesus. Before, he never needed to go out to work, because he lived by stealing. Now this man has become a Christian. It is not enough for him to say 'I have stopped stealing from people'. Now, says the apostle, that former thief must go out to work and earn money to give to people in need – see verse 28. He does not just stop taking away from people, he has to give to them.

We live in a world where many people have no moral standards. They steal and cheat and commit fraud without hesitation. If we want to be followers of Jesus we must observe scrupulously the rules of property. We must return lost things we find. We must give to people, not take away from them.

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