Teaching sermon for SNC, March 2021
7th Commandment, Do not steal

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TEXT

7th commandment - *Do not steal*
What this means for us
We should honour and love God, and so we should not take other people's money or possessions or get them in a dishonest way. Instead, we should help people to keep and improve what they have.

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INTRODUCTION

I have a vivid memory from when I was 5 or 6 years old.

I know I was that age because I remember I was in reception, my first year at school, and I remember the room.

The memory is vivid, because I can remember very consciously and deliberately,
Stealing a piece of Lego from the classroom toy box.

May sound like 'no big deal' right, I was just a kid.

But let me tell you,

I remember knowing what I was doing,
I knew it was wrong to steal,

In fact, it might be the first conscious sin in my life I have a clear memory of.

What was going on in my mind and heart as a little boy?

Basically, I badly wanted that lego,
And I was willing to do something I knew was wrong,
In order to have it.

It's a funny thing,
I've talked with other adults,
Who also remember stealing be a very early sin they committed.

Now as we grow up some of us are tempted to shoplifting and that sort of obvious stealing,

But more often we become more sophisticated and clever about how we break this commandment,

Which is why it's so crucial that Luther adds to his explanation about not getting people's money or possessions *'in a dishonest way'.*

Listen, by the way,
to what Luther says about this commandment in his large catechism as to how big a problem it is:

He writes,

'Stealing is the most common, widespread vice, but people take so little notice of it, that's it's got quite out of hand. If we had to hang all those who are really thieves, even thought they won't admit it, the world would soon be empty, and there wouldn't be enough hangmen and gallows to go around.

He goes on later,

'In short, stealing is the most common trade and the largest profession in the world. If we look at the world and all its estates, we will find that it's nothing but a big, wide stable full of big thieves.'

Not to put too finer point on it!

So let's think about this commandment tonight by examining some Biblical texts.

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DISHONEST WAYS

The first place I'd like us to turn tonight is Amos 8:4-7, p ….

Amos 8:4-7
4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
5 saying, 'When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practise deceit with false balances,
6 buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.'
7 The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

What we find in this passage are some examples of '*taking other people's money or possessions in a dishonest way',*

Forms of stealing that aren't always so obvious.

Let's just work our way through these verses.

Verse 4,
4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land…

Now, we're about to hear the Lord,

through Amos the prophet,
point out some of the ways the people were breaking the 7th commandment against stealing.

But notice how it begins,
That actually their stealing is closely connected with injustice for the poor and needy.

Same later on in the text, v 6,
The big problem is that the poor and needy are getting a raw deal.

It's worth noticing this connection because it runs right through the Bible,
Old Testament – New Testament,

Stealing is often connected with bad treatment of the poor and needy.

St Paul then flips this around in the NT, in Ephesians 4:28 ,when he says that as Christians:
'Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.'

We'll come back to some of these themes later.

So these people who are trampling on the poor,
They say, verse 5,

'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?

This is a reference to worship.

So new moon, Sabbath,

This is referring to times when they weren't to be doing business,

But were to set aside time for worship,

But these people are saying when will it be over so we can get back to work.

Their desire to make money takes top place over worship of the lord.

But it gets worse.

Because it's not just that they want worship time to be over so they can get back to their legitimate businesses.

Listen to this:

We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practise deceit with false balances,
6 buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.'

So what's going on here?

Well, there are two main dodgy practices mentioned,

The first one is false balances.

So the way it worked is that you would buy goods by weight,

Like we still might at the supermarket,

You weigh your watermelon and pay by the kilo.

But they had scales with two sides,

And the way it worked is that on one side you put your stuff that you're buying,

And on the other side you put some standard weight to work out how much the other stuff weighs,

This is the ephah and the shekel,

These are two of the standard weights.

But what these people are doing is messing around with them,

Making the balances false.

So the equivalent would be if one of our big supermarkets were found to have deliberately rigged the checkout weighing machines,

So that when you put your 1 kg watermelon on,
It actually scanned at 1.5 kg,

And so you paid 50% more than you should.

And this was a common problem in the ancient world,

So much so that 'false balances' in the Old Testament almost becomes like a symbol of injustice,
It comes up again and again.

The people of Israel were told explicitly in Leviticus 19:25
'You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. [36]
You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin…' (another unit of measurement).

So that's the one thing they were doing.

The other dodgy practice mentioned is at the end of verse 6,

'…selling the sweepings of the wheat…'

So when you harvest wheat and prepare it for sale,
you separate the proper healthy wheat,
From all the dusty rubbish, sometimes called chaff.

But what they were probably doing is mixing in all this chaff with the wheat,

So you buy a bag of wheat to make some bread,
And perhaps you've already got ripped off because the scales are out,

But then you get home and you're looking through it and you realise it's not even all wheat,
It's mixed in with all this other useless, unhealthy chaff.

It's very dodgy!

Imagine you buy your 1 kg watermelon,

You've already been charged for 1.5 kg,

But then you get home and find the middle has been hollowed out!

God is not happy, to say the least,
With these practices.

[7] *The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:*
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

That's an ominous warning against these sorts of practices.

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So, what could be a modern example of how we are tempted to do the same sort of thing?

It could be we run a business where we actually tamper with products and cheat people like that,

But let's think more broadly about something that might apply to more of us.

Think about the example of selling a second-hand car.

You've got this car,
It's on Carsales or Gumtree,

Person comes around to look at it,

What's your goal as a Christian in this context?

Hopefully it's not to cheat the person, to deceive them.

But it can be tempting in subtle ways to not be completely honest.

You know you had the prang a few years back,

And so there was some serious work done on it,

But you don't think the person knows enough about cars to notice,

So when they ask if it's had any accidents,

You say, '*oh I can't really remember*',

Because you're worried this will affect the price you're going to get.

And if you see the person is really desperate to get the car,
They need to buy,

Maybe you're tempted to wrangle for a bit of a higher price than is fair.

Again, what's your goal as a Christian in this situation?

It certainly shouldn't be to deceive, to cheat,
To steal,

But it shouldn't even necessarily be just to get the most money you possibly can out of the person,

When it comes to money and business dealings Christians are to think in terms of justice first,

But even more than that,

In terms of ***generosity***.

Money is not our God,
We're free to deal generously with it.

Remember Luther's positive love-filled way of keeping this commandment?

Instead, we should help people to keep and improve what they have.

Okay, so let's leave Amos there for now,

But let's have a look at another OT passage briefly,

In order to think a bit further about this positive side of the commandment.

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HELPING TO IMPROVE AND PROTECT

For this I'd like us to turn to Exodus 23:4-6, which is on p …, pew Bibles.

Exodus 23:4-5,
When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back.

[5] *When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free.*

So here's a situation,
Which may be a bit foreign to us modern people,
At least modern city people,

Where you come across an ox or a donkey which belongs to someone else,

It's lost or escaped or something like that,
It's 'gone astray'.

The commandment of God is 'Do not steal'.

Does this mean you can see this ox or donkey,
And think to yourself,
Well that's bad luck,
But nothing to do with me,

It's not like I broke in a stole it,
I'm off the hook,
Innocent.

Well no,
It's not that simple.

God commands his people if they encounter a situation like this,
To bring the ox or donkey back.

This is the other side of do not steal,
Luther's '*helping people to improve and protect what they have'*.

Christian theology has traditionally had categories to describe this,
Those being that there are sins of omission as well as sins of commission.

Our prayers of confession pick this up too,

'we have sinned against you by thought, word and deed,
By what we have done,
And by what we have failed to do…'

Or positively,
This is how love fills out this commandment.

It's similar, the text from Exodus says,
If you come across a donkey 'lying under its burden',

The picture here seems to be of a donkey carrying lots of stuff,

The owner perhaps isn't there for some reason,

And the donkey is collapsing under the weight,
About to be seriously injured or even die.

Do you wipe your hands of the situation,

'Well, that sully guy has loaded that donkey up too much again,
Serves him right!

But it's not my problem.'

God says it is our problem,

Free the donkey,
Release the burden,

Don't just not steal,
But help your neighbour to improve and protect what they have.

And here's the real kicker in the text that I glossed over,
Did you notice who owned these animals?

The ox of your *'enemy',*

The donkey of *'one who hates you'.*

Not just if you come across your family's stray ox,

Or your friends struggling donkey,

But those who have something against you,

Even them,

Help them to improve and protect what they have.

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So what about for us in Adelaide in 2021?

Well, let's say there's a guy that lives on your street.

You don't get on so well.

In fact,
You know for a fact he doesn't like you and he's made that clear in unpleasant ways.

This guy too,
He doesn't keep his house or yard in good order,
He has loud, late parties which disrupt the street.

You get the picture.

You notice he goes away one day for a week's holiday,
And in his rush accidentally leaves the front door open.

Then you notice some other young blokes walking past looking a bit suspicious.

What do you do?

They guy had it coming wright?

He's a nuisance,
He needs to learn some responsibility,

You didn't leave the door open,

So maybe you just turn a blind eye and let it go?

Or maybe not.

Maybe you walk over there to scare off the young guys first,

But then maybe you have to work out a way to secure the door.

Maybe that's not easy,
You don't have a key,

You have to figure something out.

And how's this,
Maybe it even costs you money to secure this guy's house while he's away,

Maybe the guy wont even appreciate it if you do.

But God will be pleased with you helping your neighbour to improve and protect what he has.

This is how love fills out the seventh commandment.

Okay, that's enough here for now.

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WORKING FOR THE LORD

I'd like now to turn to something a bit different.

Let's look at Colossians 3:22-25, p …, in the New Testament.

And here we're going to think a little about the commandment against stealing in relation to employment.

Colossians 3:22-25
Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. [23]Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, [24]since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. [25]For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.

In his large catechism on the seventh commandment against stealing,

Luther hits out fairly hard against dodgy busines practices and those in power and authority,

But, he also condemns what he calls lazy, careless servants who don't do their work properly,

And he says at one point that when they purposefully neglect their work and don't take care of things properly,
They can '*do their employer out of thirty or forty gold coins per year'.*

Now I don't know the exchange rate for a 16th century gold coin,
But you get the idea,

You don't have to be taking money out of the till to be stealing from your boss and the company.

When I got to one of the wineries where I worked as a cellar hand,

The guy who was supposed to be showing me around and showing me how to do my job,

He said,
'Now, this is a big place,
You can get away with a lot here.

We've got this first task here,
And the trick is to make that last as long as we possibly can and do as less work as we possibly can.'

Now,
That guy ended up getting sacked while I was there,
So it's not even a good strategy from a world point of view.

But maybe I should've got the sack as well.

To my shame,
I did things like that many times,
Wasting time,
Mucking around on the job,

Not treating company property well,

These are 7th commandment issues.

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This text I read gives a different picture.

Now it speaks about slaves and masters.

That's a big topic which we can't go into tonight,

But for our purposes let me say there is teaching here which applies very closely to what we know in modern society as employers and employees.

So think about it in those terms.

Obey them,
Do what you're asked to do by your boss,
As long as it's not illegal or causing you to sin in some way,

In general,
Follow instructions at work,

But here's where it get's more interesting….
…not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. [23]Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters,

Remember me, at the winery,
Tempted to hide up on the tanks somewhere to get out of work,

Temped to only look busy when the boss happens to be nearby,

St Paul says no,

You be diligent and faithful in your work,
Even when **no one** is looking.

Remember that you live in the presence of God,

Work,
in all you do,
Knowing you're ultimately doing it for him.

This vision of work will help us avoid the temptation to stealing from our bosses in obvious or subtle ways.

And again, Luther's positive love-filled explanation to this commandment applies to us in our work as well,

As employees we are to help our neighbour,
Our boss in this case,

improve and protect what they have.

And this is radically different way of looking at things from the culture you find in many work places,
At least in my experience.

Often groups of employees are quite embittered and hostile to their bosses,

And so they see it almost as a badge of honour to get as much out of the company as they can,

that sort of culture will rub off on you if you're not careful.

And here's the thing,
If this world is all there is,

It can be tempting to live that way,

Where as St Paul is giving us a different way to live.

Did you hear that, in the last lines?

You can do all this,

[24]since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. [25]For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.

One of the ways we can be guarded against the temptation to stealing,

Is to remember that ultimate our reward is in heaven,

We don't need to grasp for everything we want and think we need in this world,

We serve the Lord Christ,

Our inheritance in him is our reward,

Which leads to our final text for tonight.

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JESUS AND THIEVES

Okay,
So we looked at the false scales and dishonest practices which can be forms of stealing,

We thought about employment and how we do that as Christian people,

Now to round off tonight,

Let's look at how Jesus deals with seventh-commandment breakers.

Because we are all guilty here,

How do we find redemption?

Where do we get the power to live this different way the Bible shows us?

For this I'd like to turn to Luke 19:1-10, the account of Zacchaeus, which we read earlier, p…

We're introduced to a man named Zacchaeus,

Who we're told is a chief tax collector and was rich.

Famously he climbs a tree to see Jesus as he's 'short in stature'.

Those of you who are vertically-challenged and have been to concerts know how frustrating it can be not to be able to see what's going on!

Now at first, we don't know in the text that there's necessarily anything blatantly off-track in Zacchaeus' life,

But then later we hear the people grumbling about him that he's a 'sinner',
Something's going on here that the people know about that we don't yet in the text explicitly.

And more significantly we have Zacchaeus himself speaking about giving his money away,
And paying back those he has ***defrauded***.

So by Zacchaeus own admission we're dealing with more of these 'dishonest ways' of getting people's money and possessions.

Now we're not told exactly how Zacchaeus did this,

But we can make a fairly good, educated guess.

It goes like this:

You're in a position of power and authority,

Your job is to collect taxes from the people to pass on to the Romans,

So it's not a big step to just charge a little extra,

And pocket the cash.

It's generally understood that this is what tax collectors got up to in those days.

Now that was bad enough,
But the reason they were really despised by the people is that these tax collectors were often Jewish people,

Who were working for the Roman authorities and being part of this system of taxes that they saw as making the Jewish people's live miserable.

So he was something of a traitor in their eyes,
As well as a thief,

A 'sinner' they call him, someone rejected by the community.

So how does Jesus deal with seventh-commandment breakers?

Well, Jesus had not written Zachaeus off.

Jesus had not given up on him.

No one is beyond the reach of the grace of God,

And so Jesus seeks him out,

Jesus invites himself to his home,

And by his presence with Zacchaeus,
he saves and transforms him.

Did you hear the effect?

What is the fruit of Jesus saving and transformative presence with this seventh-commandment breaker?

Not just a return to justice and fairness,

But a move to generosity.

[8]*Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.'*

That's the Spirit's work of love shaped commandment keeping now evident in his life.

As God's people to whom his salvation has come,

We don't just see other people's money and possessions as '*not ours to take or get in dishonest ways',*

We even see our money,

As not really our money.

But simply as a gift God gives for us to ***use for others,***
Especially those in need.

Lent is a great time to cultivate this habit of generosity to the poor and needy.

It's not rocket-science,

Money and possessions is one of the most tempting false gods in our lives,
We are naturally drawn to make it the central reality in our lives,

And one small way we begin to grow in detaching ourselves from its power,

Is to give it away.

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We all stand guilty before God's holy law,
Including this commandment,

On our own we do not have the strength to live according to God's will when it comes to money and possessions.

But ultimately the way Jesus saves all us commandment breakers,

Is by going to the cross to give his life,
To take on himself our punishment,

To set us free.

And don't forget,
When Jesus hung on that cross,
Do you remember who was either side of him?

two *thieves*,

One which lashes out at Jesus unrepentance,

one which is repentant and acknowledges his sin.

To that thief Jesus says,
'Today you will be with me in paradise.'

It's in Jesus,
In ***his*** seeking *us* out,
In his death and resurrection for us,
In his presence with us,

That is our redemption from all our commandment breaking,

As well as the Spirit's ***power*** to live a new way.

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CONCLUSION

What is the 7th commandment?
Do not steal
What does this mean for us?
We should honour and love God, and so we should not take other people's money or possessions or get them in a dishonest way. Instead, we should help people to keep and improve what they have.
Let's pray…