

The Ten Commandments

The eighth article by Neil Richardson in our year-long series



8th Commandment:
You shall not steal

The eight commandment is another with an apparently simple thrust but a subtle set of complications.

Defining “to steal” is easy on paper but fraught in practice.

For example, we could define it in these three ways:-

1. to take something that belongs to somebody else, illegally or without the owner’s permission
2. to take or get something secretly, surreptitiously or by trickery
3. to take something that another person has created, especially ideas, theories, or a piece of writing, and present it as one’s own.

source: Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999 Microsoft Corporation.

(I had to put that credit in or I would have been guilty of stealing!)

The main image of stealing is of bank robbers, house burglars, the obvious type of stealing but in reality, the subtle steal is far more prevalent. Examples might be taking a box of staples from the office for personal use at home or photocopying personal stuff on the firm’s photocopier. The grey areas grow as the border between work and home is blurred with an increase in working from home.



And what about the subtlety of finding money in the street or on a train? Do you rush down to the nearest Police Station and hand it in, or do you put it in your pocket and regard it as “finders keepers?”

And what about if the shopkeeper gives you change for £20 when you only proffered £10? Do you rush back into the shop and hand back the difference, or walk quickly to your car in the hope that they don’t recognise you next time? If it is a big Superstore, you will have little compunction. If a small family run store, you may feel responsibility to be scrupulously honest, perhaps?

And then there’s the Tax Return. Presenting your financial affairs in such a manner as to reduce your tax liability improperly is also a form of stealing. In this case, normally people don’t feel bad about it because the victim isn’t an individual but an amorphous corporation which doesn’t have any real personal identity. The Government!





What underpins this and every one of the commandments is its setting in a community. Remember - having rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, God invites them to make a Covenant and agree to live by a set of rules so that they may grow together as a community of faith and serve God in the joy of fulfilling his will in all aspects of their individual and communal lives. God's offer of a Covenant follows his saving work, rather than the other way round. Salvation is not conditional but offered generously and to everyone. What we learn from the story of the people of Israel is that our common life is much more important than we sometimes appreciate. Shared values and shared experiences deepen the quality of life and offer a sense of identity and purpose. They also create a real sense of responsibility, not just for me and mine, but for the whole community. Our common life is worth working at! The well-being which this can offer is something to be highly valued and if you have ever experienced it, you will always want it to be your day-to-day experience. Crossing the Red Sea by Marc Chagall

I remember in my childhood how prevalent it was for people to leave their house doors unlocked because the neighbourhood people all shared the same experiences, felt the same fears, and to a large extent, felt able to trust each other and not fear the inevitability of theft as we do these days. Admittedly, we all knew that in each other's homes there was precious little to steal as we all shared the same poverty! That experience of living with trust and communality is one that we would all benefit from and enjoy again. It represents a "quality of life" which is to be desired.

When you live in a community and feel the positive benefits, things change. When you feel supported and guided and recognised and valued by your community, matters such as stealing become more important. In this setting, stealing is an affront not just to the victim but to the whole community. It represents a breach of trust which has implications for absolutely everyone and so people feel more strongly about their own moral responses to opportunities and invitations to steal, however trivial they may seem viewed from the outside.

Stealing ideas is a rather less secure area to consider because ideas can't be copyrighted or protected. It is the application of ideas where the possibility of theft occurs. The sharp end of this is where such theft would bring financial disaster to someone else.

Plagiarism is a lazy way of presenting someone else's work as your own but there is a big difference between blatant copying and re-presentation on the one hand and the development of



these themes on the other hand. After all, ideas are meant for sharing, development, and transformation, are they not?

In the complicated world of today, the lines between stealing and not-stealing may be blurred in some areas, but deep down, we all know when our response has been one of stealing, even though we may be able to present it as something else.