

Sermon 19.6.2022

I don't know how you're going, but I'm being so challenged by the Ten Commandments. They're so short but so profound. I found out something interesting a few weeks ago. The word that we translate law, or commandment, actually means "Word". These are ten words from God to us – words of guidance, instruction, direction on how to live a life that will flourish. And each of these "words" point back to the first commandment – *You shall have no other gods before me.*

Today's word or commandment – You shall not steal. Ross, my father-in-law, and I have been reading Alex Algie's life story. This is Barb Algie's brother-in-law who died almost 5 years ago. He was a policeman in the country for much of his life and he tells a number of stories about cattle stealing. One of these times a steer was stolen off a property and the owner found his steer on another property, but it had been over branded and a dispute over the ownership took place. Alex heard that the steer was being sent to the abattoir, but he arrived after it had been killed. Anyway, Alex got the head and the hide/skin of the steer and when he did, he found that the original brand was plain on the inside of the skin of the steer, which proved the beast had been over branded illegally. And what's more, the thief gave the age of the steer as 3 years old, but the teeth showed that it was only about 15 months old. The thief got convicted. I reckon Alex might have been able to get a job on one of the TV detective shows.

Today's word or commandment – You shall not steal. But it's more than just putting a balaclava on and going to someone's house or stealing a cow from your neighbour's yard. It's about our inner beliefs and attitudes. **Everything is a gift from God, given to us from his riches so that we might give to others. It's not given to us to hoard, it's to share. If I keep my own life for myself, I am stealing from God.**

The Bible reading from Matthew 19 about the man who asked Jesus about how he could have eternal life. Jesus asks him if he's kept the commandments. He says, "Which ones?" And then Jesus, in v.18, says, *You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, <sup>19</sup> honour your father and mother, and 'love your neighbour as yourself.'*" You might have noticed that Jesus doesn't mention the first 4 commands and puts the fifth after the ninth and then adds the summary of the commandments, *love your neighbour as*

*yourself.*' The man says he's kept all of these, but Jesus has one for him. If you want to be perfect sell everything and follow me. Be completely committed to me. It's not about ticking off a list it's about an attitude of heart. And this commandment today takes us right to our hearts.

And there are a number of levels here. Firstly, it is about theft. But theft is not just about money. Certainly, some biblical examples of stealing include robbery, but it goes much further than this. Stealing also involves ensuring accuracy with weights (Leviticus 19), the moving of boundaries (Deuteronomy 19), the taking of property, kidnapping, robbing the elderly and the cutting of corners. Sounds familiar to our world today! And the list goes on: Not doing your duty at work; withholding of wages; failing to repay debts; pretending not to have money when you really do; devaluing items for the purpose of profit; not returning something found that is not yours; cheating on taxes; wasting things that could be a blessing to others; causing wilful damage; injustice; dishonouring contractual agreements; going back on your word; and robbing God by not returning His tithes (Malachi 3).

There is another level that we need to consider carefully. Our material goods are like the gifts we receive from the Spirit. They're ours, but we possess them to edify the body, to use them for others. We don't give away everything, but we DO use everything to bless. We're given material goods to advance God's justice.

Once we acknowledge that God owns everything, even our very lives, it changes everything. It takes us back to Genesis. God created Adam to have dominion, to take ownership over creation. But there was one thing that was exclusively only to be God's, the tree of knowledge. Adam and Eve steal from this tree and the pattern of our actions is set in motion. We have continued to steal God's "holy things". Can you see how murder is like this – the killing of someone steals a person who is precious to God, made in his image. But we assault the image of God too when we steal the property of others. Above all, there is the stealing of ourselves from God. I Corinthians 6:19,20 on the Bulletin: "We are not our own, we were bought at a price. We bear THE Name that marks us as God's property, yet we want to be our own god. It ties in with the third commandment, doesn't it? Every time we might steal and commit sacrilege, misusing God's holy things.

And when we look at Jesus, we see one who, though he was himself God, did not think equality with God a thing to be grasped, seized, or stolen, Instead, he humbled

himself, offered, and emptied himself. Though rich, he became poor that we might share in God's riches. He didn't steal but gave. He repaid the debt WE had incurred.

It's fascinating to see the social system that God set up in Canaan, the Promised Land, the Land of plenty – everyone had a part of it; every tribe got an allotment, according to their size.

The entire economic structure was designed for people to have what they needed; to be provided for. God had up to this time provided manna – there was always enough for everyone, however much they collected. If they tried to collect more than they could eat and then store it by the next morning it had maggots in it and couldn't be eaten. A great object lesson hey. It's because when we live in excess and when we don't use our excess to benefit others it affects our community, and it eventually eats away at us.

But back to the promised land. In this new land every 7<sup>th</sup> year outstanding debts were to be forgiven. If things had gone pear-shaped for you in the previous 6 years and you'd built up debts, this 7<sup>th</sup> year would restore things. Have a look at Deuteronomy 15. There was even a provision for the 50<sup>th</sup> year – if you have lost your land; you would go back to your original land every 50 years. Land ownership would revert back to the original owners. People would have a common inheritance; you would only live on what you needed. It was an amazing system; it didn't last long. But it reinforced the truth or idea that everything is a gift, and we are not to hoard possessions for ourselves but to be generous.

If you've amassed resources just for your enrichment, then you are stealing. When you hoard, when you are hoarding your resources, not for building a community, not for generous acts of hospitality, you are crippling your community, but you will find that eventually it will cripple yourself.

Everything I have is a gift. In fact, God has given me a great inheritance, not just for the future but right now here on earth. This entire inheritance is given by grace. When you understand that this inheritance cannot be taken away and it cannot be earned and yet it has been given freely at the expense of another, you'll want to give yourself to others and you will relish the opportunity to give yourself to others, to meet the needs of others, to give up your resources for others.

Many of you will know the story of Jean Valjean in *Le Misérables*. In *Les Mis*, Jean Valjean is a thief, and we find in the story that he moves from being this convicted and hardened and lonely and isolated thief to eventually becoming someone who would risk his life for others, someone who would give up his personal resources to meet the needs of others. And what's fascinating is what turns him around – how he got this way. In the beginning of the story, he meets the bishop. Jean Valjean has just been set free from prison and yet he's struggling in his new life as a former convict. And so, the bishop brings him in, and he cares for him, and he provides him with shelter and food; and while he's staying with the bishop, Jean Valjean, in the night, steals 2 silver candlesticks from the bishop. Valjean is caught by the police, he is brought back to the bishop and the bishop says, "Oh no, no the candlesticks were not stolen, they were not taken forcibly, they were a gift from me. In fact, you forgot to take these other things I gave you", and he hands him a whole lot of silver cutlery. Jean Valjean is stunned but it is the act that turns his life. He has received what he doesn't deserve. He has been the object of grace. He now becomes a person who loves others, is generous and eventually gives his life for others. The bishop deliberately gives up his personal goods for Jean Valjean so that he could have a new life. Jean Valjean goes on to give to other people. But he always kept those candlesticks in his living room to remind him of the great gift of the bishop, and what he had been saved from.

Do you see; the bishop sacrificed his own resources, the candlesticks, not begrudgingly but willingly, in order to redeem Jean Valjean and to turn him from hard hearted to incredibly generous. This story, in fact, points us to the greatest story. On the cross we see God's willing sacrifice; we see Jesus who gives all of his resources, everything he had, his own inheritance; he gave it all up generously, sacrificially, willingly. It's not a coincidence that Jesus who was the king of the Jews and therefore all of the land was his rightful inheritance; he was crucified next to 2 thieves. The king of the Jews who rightfully owned everything treated like a thief.

Luke 23 – <sup>38</sup> *There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.* <sup>39</sup> *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"* <sup>40</sup> *But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"* <sup>41</sup> *We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.* <sup>42</sup> *Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

<sup>43</sup> *Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

For Jean Valjean it only required 2 candlesticks to turn him from hardened self-serving convict to a truly free man. But don't you see, Jesus Christ gave up his entire inheritance for you; one who had everything, crucified like a thief. We are punished justly for we are getting what our deeds deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong, and he did it to give us an inheritance – a land, far beyond anything we deserve, far beyond anything we could have imagined. And this is why Paul writes, *"And you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, for your sakes he became poor, so you, through his poverty, might become rich."*

Do you see how free this could make you? If you realised that you have this vast inheritance that can never be taken away there is in fact nothing you wouldn't be willing to give up for another because you already have an inheritance that you will never lose. It's an inheritance by grace and therefore I can give it away. When you hoard you are the most captive, and the most hardened and the most cold; so, look to Jesus who gave everything he had, everything that he deserved to give us everything we didn't deserve. When we do this, and we realise that we have everything we need in Jesus then we can finally give our lives away to others and we can finally be free.

Prayer: Father we 're thankful for the fact that though Jesus was rich, for our sakes he became poor, so that we, through his poverty, might become rich. Father, remind us of the vast inheritance that we have in you. Would you remind us of the vast riches that we have in your son and the great cost that he paid. That he gave up the inheritance that he deserved to give us the inheritance that we didn't deserve. Make us a generous people, a kind people, and a sacrificial people, a people who are truly free.