

Lesson 6: The Opposite of Stealing

Introduction

This week we're talking about the seventh commandment: "you shall not steal." This commandment is about not taking things that don't belong to you, obviously, but it's also about helping others keep what is theirs. We're going to learn about this commandment in three ways.

1. We'll hear the story of Lot and Abraham when Abraham decided to split the land of Canaan with Lot so they would both have enough.
2. We'll learn about what it means not to steal, and how that extends to helping others keep what is theirs.
3. We'll learn that the commandment not to steal means we change the world by emphasizing that everyone is supposed to have enough for their needs.

The Story of Lot and Abraham

This story is from Genesis 13, about two guys named Abraham and Lot. You've probably heard of Abraham, but maybe not Lot. Lot was Abraham's nephew who went with him from the land of Haran all the way to the promised land of Canaan, the land that God promised to give to Abraham and his descendants forever. Something you should know is that, after years of wandering and lots of hijinks, both Abraham and Lot were very, very rich. And way back in those days, that meant they had really, really big herds of sheep and goats, along with lots of servants and slaves. Lot and Abraham travelled around together, and their herds got bigger and bigger.

One day, some of Lot's servants got into a fight with some of Abraham's servants over a patch of grazing land. The flocks were so big that they couldn't both graze in the same place, but because Lot and Abraham were travelling around together, there was only so much grazing land in any given area. Word made its way back to Abraham about this fight that had happened, and Abraham had to think about what to do.

The Promised Land was promised to Abraham, not Lot. God hadn't promised anything to Abraham's nephew. If Abraham wanted, he could tell Lot that he needed to find somewhere else to live, and take his flocks with him, that way Abraham would have enough room for all his sheep and goats. It would solve the problem of their servants fighting because they wouldn't be competing for the same grazing land. But Abraham did something else.

He took Lot to a high mountain that showed the whole Promised Land, and it was *big*. There was lots of room, way more room than any one man's flocks could need. Abraham explained to Lot, if he picked one part of the land and Abraham picked the other, they could

each have plenty of room for all their flocks and they wouldn't run into any more fights between their servants. So Abraham, despite the fact that the land was, technically, only promised to *him*, offered to split the land with Lot. Very generous.

But of course, all land isn't created equal. Lot took a look at the whole land, and saw on the one side hills and rocks and rough terrain; and on the other he saw a flat plain with a winding river and lots of well-watered grassland. He chose to take the well-watered plain, and left the hill country to his uncle Abraham. That's not terribly nice, is it? But Abraham knew that even the less awesome part of the land would be more than enough for his flocks, so he agreed.

The two of them went their separate ways, and they each grew richer on their own. They both had plenty of room for their flocks, because there was always enough there. They just had to figure out how to share it. Realizing that there is more than enough for everyone, and that we are all called to share the abundance that God gives us, is the whole foundation of the sixth commandment, and Abraham shows us how we can follow it by sharing what he had—which was already more than enough—with his nephew.

What it means not to steal

"Don't steal" is pretty straightforward. Don't take things that don't belong to you. This is true of anything that belongs to someone else, whether it's something in a store or something in someone's home. Downloading a song you haven't paid for or using someone's art without permission is also stealing. Stealing is any time you take something that someone else has put in time, effort, or money to get. If it doesn't belong to you, you don't get to take it without permission.

But, like the commandment not to kill, not stealing has more to it. Martin Luther put it like this: "We are to fear and love God, so that we neither take our neighbor's money or property nor acquire them by using shoddy merchandise or crooked deals, but instead help them to improve and protect their property and income." Now, Luther obviously puts in the fact that stealing means not taking our neighbor's things (he says money or property), but he includes two more things that I want us to talk about.

First, he mentions not acquiring our neighbor's things through shoddy merchandise or crooked deals. What do you think that means? *Allow for answers*. Think of it like this. Is it right for someone to sell you a computer that you later find out doesn't work? What about if someone sells you a collectible that they claim is super valuable, but you later find out it's not worth anything and they knew it? Sure, they didn't technically take anything from you without permission—you paid for it, after all. But this commandment means that we are not supposed to take advantage of people by selling them crappy merchandise or tricking people into buying things that aren't worth what they're paying.

And the other part of what Luther has to say about the commandment is that we are called to improve and protect our neighbor's property and income. So it's not just about not stealing; it's about helping our neighbor prosper. Advocate for better pay. Talk up their small business. Shop at the store that your neighbor owns. Help them make connections so they can do their job better. This commandment means we are also called to help our neighbor in their material needs.

Sometimes, though, that looks like what Abraham did with Lot. It looks like seeing where we have a lot, and sharing it with our neighbor. God doesn't give us material blessings for us to hoard them; God blesses us with more stuff so that we have more stuff to share with others who don't have as much. Abraham, who had the whole Promised Land all to himself, did what God called him to do and shared his abundance with his nephew.

How does it affect the real world?

There are two huge things that would happen if everyone in the world followed the seventh commandment to its fullest. The first would be that everyone would have all that they needed, and the second is that we would trust each other with all that we have.

Think about the first thing. The commandment not to steal covers not just keeping ourselves from taking what isn't ours, but also not cheating people out of what they have and making sure our neighbor has everything they need. If you think about it, if we just fulfilled that last part, the other two would mostly fall into place. Who would steal if they already had what they needed? Who would need to trick someone into paying for crappy merchandise if they already had their needs taken care of? God calls on us to follow this commandment because God wants everyone to have enough.

Think about Abraham and Lot. When you have a lot, God wants you to share it with those who don't. When you have the opportunity to help your neighbor with what they need, God is giving you the chance to share in the blessings you're given. If we all did that—if we all shared the abundance God gives us—we wouldn't feel so committed to hoarding what we have. Everyone would have enough because God gives us enough to share.

And the second thing is that we would trust each other. How often do we avoid eye contact with those salespeople in the mall—when we could still do that—because we just know they'll try to trick us into buying whatever product they're selling that we don't need and costs too much? We lock our doors and won't help people because we're suspicious of others trying to steal from us—whether by taking advantage or by outright taking.

God gives us this commandment because there is a plan in mind for the things that we have. We're really not meant to have a whole bunch of stuff if our neighbor doesn't have enough. We're not meant to trick people or take advantage of people and claim that's just the

way the world works. We're called to be anti-thieves, being generous with what we have because God is generous with us.

It would change the world if we followed this commandment to its fullest meaning. Everyone would have enough. Everyone would make sure everyone else had what they needed. There would be no need to steal, or cheat, or swindle. It's quite a vision that God is aiming us at, but God wants us to try, because it will change the world if we even get halfway there.

Closing

Let's review what we learned tonight.

1. We heard the story of Lot and Abraham when Abraham decided to split the land of Canaan with Lot so they would both have enough.
2. We learned about what it means not to steal, and how that extends to helping others keep what is theirs.
3. We learned that the commandment not to steal means we change the world by emphasizing that everyone is supposed to have enough for their needs.

Let's pray. God who provides, you are generous, as you were generous with Lot and Abraham. Teach us to treat our neighbors fairly, not cheat others, and share the abundance that you give us. Help us make the world the way you want it to be. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.