

“A Secret Message from Morocco”
Genesis 27:1-24
Series: Breaking Bad Week 8. Do Not Steal
The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hogleund

The Woodside Church

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While checking my email, I found a very urgent and secret correspondence:

From: Nganza Mobutu
Attn: Pastor Doug Hogleund
Subject: Investment purpose

I got your information through this good medium who confirmed your credibility to do business with you. I am Mr. Nganza Mobutu, the son of the former President of Zaire. I escaped with my father to Morocco where my father died.

I then changed my identity so my investments will not be traced and confiscated. However, the new President of Zaire asked the Swiss Government to freeze all my father's billions deposited in Swiss Banks.

I deposited \$24.8 million in a commercial vault maintained by a security outfit in the Ivory Coast. These funds are security coded to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands. Please get in touch with me at the above phone number so you can assist me in investing the money in multinational corporations and real estate. I am trusting in you because I believe that you are a God-fearing person, as such I believe you will not sit on our fund.

Please give me your cell number if you are ready to assist so we can discuss remuneration for your services.

Best regards,
Nganza Mobutu.

Imagine that! A deposed dictator, secret identities, security codes, frozen Swiss bank accounts, multinational investments, international money-laundering and twenty-five million dollars all depending on me, your humble pastor.

What's wrong with this picture? Everything. You might imagine Tom Cruise, Matt Damon, or Daniel Craig in this situation. But the Rev. Douglas Hogleund? I don't think so. I'm sure your email inbox is crammed with endless variations of this old scam. The victim is lured into the trap by promises of great reward, if he or she helps a stranded fugitive get a large sum of money out of the country. But to do so, you must put up some cash of your own in the hope of getting a bigger payoff. In time, more and more funds are required until the victim realizes, too late, he or she has been swindled.

Did you notice the double bait in this scam? It tempts me with millions of dollars and then compliments me on my integrity and piety. In effect it says, 'Because you are a God-fearing person, we know you will want to join our corrupt money-laundering scheme.' You can complain about these swindlers, but if you get hooked, you only have your own greed to blame.

In our Breaking Bad series we've now reached the eighth commandment, "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15). Like all the commandments, this one is necessary because a society can't be safe without it.

Years ago, a professional band of thieves were hitting homes in my neighborhood. My children Peter and Kristin reached the age where they could be home a short time by themselves. The very first time we tried it, there was only a half-hour between the time Lisa left and I arrived. It was broad daylight. And yet, in those thirty minutes, unbeknownst to my children, a woman entered our backyard and began looking in the windows. I know this because my neighbor spotted her and asked, "What are you doing?" "I'm giving them an estimate on landscaping," she replied. My neighbor had a strange feeling about her. He knocked on the door but the kids didn't hear him. Returning to the backyard, he saw her bolt for the street and take off. For those of you who have been robbed, the feelings of insecurity and dread are terrifying. Without the eighth commandment, society fractures and crumbles into chaos.

But what about us? Is it possible that you and I, law-abiding citizens with no criminal records, have also broken this commandment? Ralph Wexler once reported

Lying, cheating, and stealing are becoming an "acceptable norm" among high school and college students. In a recent survey, the Institute reported that 61 percent of the high school and 32 percent of the college students polled admitted to having cheated on an exam during the past year. 33 percent of the high school and 16 percent of college students said they'd stolen something in the last year. 16 percent of the high school and 32 percent of the college students said they'd lied on a resume or job application.¹

And it's possible the others in the survey weren't telling the truth.

In some cases, stealing is such a part of the culture that some try to make money off it. I was in Manhattan visiting my daughter Kristin, her husband Bryan and my grandpup Winnie when I noticed how many pets there are. Apparently there are eight million cats in New York City and very few places to bury your dearly departed Garfield. So one lady came up with a brilliant idea. She placed an ad in the paper saying, "When your dear cat passes away, I will come and take care of it for \$25." She would buy an old suitcase for two dollars at the Salvation Army. When someone called she went to the home and put the poor cat in the suitcase. Then she boarded the subway, set down the

¹ National and International Religion Report, quoted in *Signs of the Times*, June, 1993, p. 6.

suitcase and looked the other way. Like clockwork a thief would come by and steal her suitcase. She looks up and cries, "Wait. Stop. Thief." Then she buys another suitcase. Don't worry cat owners – it's an urban legend. I'm sorry dog owners it's an urban legend.

Of course, stealing doesn't only happen in New York. A certain level of theft has become common, even tolerated in our society. Faulty tax returns, falsifying time sheets, taking company property or merchandise, lying to customers, padding expense accounts, keeping two sets of books, keeping money accidentally deposited in your account, keeping money hidden from your spouse. We tell ourselves, "It's okay." "They'll never miss the money." "They can afford it." "They will just cheat someone else." "They owe it to me." "Everyone is doing it." "I deserve it." The U.S. Department of Commerce,

Employee dishonesty costs American businesses over \$50 billion annually. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce estimates that 75 percent of all employees steal at least once, and half of these steal again and again. The chamber also reports that one of every three business failures are the direct result of employee theft.²

In some cases, people think you are foolish to be honest. Once I picked up a watermelon for a party. The price tag in the produce aisle read \$6.20. But the checkout person manually rang it up as \$4. "The tag said \$6.20," I informed her. She stopped and stared at me. "I don't understand," she replied, "you want to pay more for this?" "No, I don't want to pay more," I said, "I just thought I should pay what it costs." In my mind, honesty and integrity are worth more to me than \$2.20.

It might seem Jacob sold his soul for much less. The plot starts with his mother.

Now Rebekah was listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau left for the open country to hunt game and bring it back, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Look, I overheard your father say to your brother Esau, 'Bring me some game and prepare me some tasty food to eat, so that I may give you my blessing in the presence of the Lord before I die.' Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies. Genesis 27:5-10

Under the firm hand of his mother Rebekah, Jacob cooks up a meal, drapes himself in his brother's tunic, straps hair onto his arms and neck and fools his old, sick, blind father Isaac into giving him the blessing meant for brother Esau. In Biblical times, the blessing or curse of a dying parent had the power to predict the future. "What if my father touches me?" Jacob whines to his mother, "I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing." His mother says to him, "My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say" (Genesis 27:12-13). Their swindle works. Isaac is duped into blessing Jacob. When Esau arrives and discovers the awful truth, Isaac

² Bob Mather, "Employee theft: Prevention Beats Apprehension"

shakes with anger, Esau flies into a rage, Jacob runs off into exile for twenty years. And Rebekah? Her wish comes true – the curse falls upon her. Because of her deceit, she never sees the face of her son again.

Jacob's dysfunctional family reveals a key reason why someone steals. One person takes from another to fill an emotional need. Isaac and Rebekah each need to favor one son over the other. Esau and Jacob each desire to dominate the other. In the end it breaks up the family. We all have emotional needs we think will be satisfied by taking something. A teen shoplifts for the excitement and thrill. An addict steals to pay for a habit. Someone might take from another out of revenge, anger, depression, fear or to gain power. Often, the thing stolen is meaningless and the thief quickly learns the object does not heal the hurt. So he or she must steal again.

Possessions and money are not the only items stolen. You might be a time thief.

The deliberate waste and abuse of company time costs the U.S. economy over \$120 billion a year. This loss is three times more than it is for recognized business crime. At some companies 20-40% of employee time is stolen. Office employees are 30% worse than blue-collar workers, perhaps because supervision isn't as close. Workers under 30 are the biggest offenders. Watch out for executives who set bad examples. If the boss is a time thief, employees will be too.³

You can also be a time thief at home. Stealing away valuable moments of time with your spouse, parents or children damages these crucial relationships.

You might steal someone's reputation by passing on gossip about them. Jesus also had some hard words for those who steal someone's innocence,

If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Matthew 18:6

It is possible to steal another's hopes and dreams, another's peace and joy, another's love and affection, even another's will to live.

Yet by far, the greatest theft of all is stealing yourself. Jesus said,

For whoever wants to save (or hold onto) his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it ... to gain the whole world, yet forfeit one's soul? Or what can one give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:35-37)

³ Creative Management in Homelife, May 1985.

Your life was created by God. It belongs to Him. To clutch and cling to it, to snatch your life from God's hand means you will, in the end, lose it. But to give your life back to the Lord ensures it is in the safest place possible where no thief can steal, kill or destroy it. If you give your life to Jesus, He promises to give back to you a full and eternal life.

Whenever there is a robbery, God's Law always requires the thief to return what was taken and to make some restitution. If you have taken from another, it is essential to turn, ask forgiveness and make amends. It will heal both their soul and yours. Nothing steals the joy of life like unconfessed sin on the conscience.

Dr. F.E. Marsh was preaching on this question and urging his hearers to confess this sin and make restitution for wrong done to others. At the close a young man came up to him with a troubled countenance. "Pastor," he explained, "you have put me in a sad fix. I have wronged another and I am ashamed to confess it or to try to put it right. You see, I am a boat builder and the man I work for is (not a believer). I talk to him often about Jesus and urge him to come and hear you preach, but he scoffs and ridicules it all. Now, I'm guilty of something that, if I admit it to him, will ruin my testimony forever."

He then said some time ago he started to build a boat for himself in his own yard. In this work copper nails are used because they do not rust in the water. These nails are quite expensive and the young man carried home quantities of them to use on the job. He knew it was stealing, but he tried to quiet his conscience by telling himself the master had so many he would never miss them. Besides he was not being paid what he thought he deserved. But this sermon made him face the fact he was a thief with no excuse.

"But," said he, "I cannot tell my boss what I did or offer to pay for those I used and return the rest. If I do he will think I am just a hypocrite. Yet those copper nails are digging into my conscience and I know I'll never have peace until I put this matter right."

For weeks the struggle went on. Then one night he came to Dr. Marsh and said, "Pastor, I've settled for the copper nails and my conscience is relieved at last." "What happened when you confessed to your employer what you did?" asked the pastor. "Oh," he answered, "he looked queerly at me, then exclaimed, 'George, I always did think you were just a hypocrite, but now I begin to feel there's something in this Christianity after all. Any religion that would make a dishonest workman come back and confess stealing copper nails and offer to settle for them, must be worth having.'" Dr. Marsh asked if he might use the story, and was granted permission.

He told this story many times and almost invariably people have come to him afterwards telling of "copper nails" in one form or another that they had to get rid of. On one occasion, he told it at a High School chapel service. The next day the principal saw me and said, "As a result of that 'copper nails' story, ever so many stolen fountain pens and other things were returned to their rightful owners."

The next day a lady came up and said, "Doctor, I have 'copper nails' on my conscience too. I am a book-lover. I stole a number of books from a friend of mine who

gets far more than I can ever afford. I decided last night I must get rid of the 'copper nails,' so I took them all back to her today and confessed my sin. I can't tell you how relieved I am. She forgave me, and God has forgiven me. I am so thankful the 'copper nails' are not digging into my conscience any more."⁴

So what will you do? Will you let the copper nails dig into your conscience? Or will you use them to repair a relationship?

Amen.

⁴ H.A. Ironside, Illustrations of Bible Truth, 1945, Moody Press, p. 104-106