# Heart of Gold!

Sermon preached By Rev. Chuck Cole July 18, 2021 at St. John’s UMC

# Exodus 20:15 (New International Version)

15 “You shall not steal

Matthew 5:42 (new International Version)

42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

In the musical Les Misérables, based on Victor Hugo’s classic novel, the recently paroled Jean Valjean seeks shelter in a bishop’s home. The home was generally speaking quite simple but there were silver dishes, utensils, plates etc. As he sleeps the temptation of the silver is too much for Val Jean and he steals some of the silver at night and runs away with it. The police find him and bring him back to the bishop the next day. The officers say that Jean Val Jean claims that it was a gift. The Bishop pauses he commends the officers for doing their job but insists that these valuable items were gifts; what’s more, the bishop claims that Jean Valjean forgot the most valuable candlesticks and he gives them to him as well.

This is an act of incredible grace prodigal generosity. It is a beautiful picture of unmerited favor, of being blessed when it is not deserved. Which is true of all of us in christ Grace that is infinitely more valuable than silver and gold grace that united us with God even though we are far away from him. This grace is given at no cost to us but at great cost to him.

The Bishop discerned in that moment that the best use of the silver was for Jean Val Jean to walk away with those goods having received unmerited grace and favor than for him to be found in violation of his parole.

The Bishop did not of course support theft but he turned those items which he could have clinged to into a gift of grace. The officers are confused but far more so is Jean Val Jean himself. He is mystified and uncomprehending this is so contrary to anything he had before experienced. It launches Jean Val Jean on a long slow quest of redemption. He takes the wealth and established himself and then grows into not only a man who does not do the wrong of stealing but eventually comes to possess a generous heart like that of the Bishop and to love in a like way.

The Bishop's heart is a mirror of God’s heart generous beyond all understanding. It is a full expression of the type of heart that our commandment and our verses from Matthew call forth from us. It is a heart that fully obeys the 8th commandment.

This week again we have on the surface a profoundly simple command. You shall not steal not steal. Lo tignov.

Obviously, this command prohibits simple theft: taking a physical object that is not yours. But the ancient Hebrew concept here is much broader. The law honors private property rights broadly. It demands restitution even in cases that might have been accidental, such as livestock grazing in another man's field or vineyard (Exodus 22:1-9 (ESV).In the book of Leviticus, the prohibitions of robbing and stealing are repeated in the context of loving one's neighbor as oneself and the prohibition is expanded to include dealing falsely or fraudulently in matters of trade and negotiations. Wages owed to a hired worker are not to be withheld. Neighbors must not oppress (take uncharitable advantage of a neighbors vulnerability or weakness) or rob each other. (Leviticus 19:9-17). To do any of these things is a violation of the eighth commandment.

 It is a breaking of community it is a violation of the image of God in which all are made. It robs the individual of a piece of the dominion and responsibility all human beings have over the world.

This broader understanding flows down through the entirety of Christian theology and makes its way to us through the General Rules of the early Methodist Societies. Early methodists were required to demonstrate their ongoing desire to be saved by

By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced, such as: (the following are connected to our commandment for today)

buying or selling spirituous liquors (buying or selling dangerous products)

Slaveholding; buying or selling slaves.

the using many words in buying or selling.

The buying or selling goods that have not paid the duty.

The giving or taking things on usury—i.e., unlawful interest.

Borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them.

These are all understood to be violations of the eighth commandment and failures of love. The idea here is that the commandment forbids any action that takes resources, generally tangible, from one person to another unlawfully or unjustly. It is a profound failure of love. It is wrong for everyone it is wrong for the poor to steal from the rich and vice-versa

Like with all the other commands violations of this command ripple out into the communities affected and many suffer as a result. Faithfulness on the other hand offers tremendous benefits that are hard to quantify precisely though they are enormous.

Vishal Mangalwadi an Indian Economist reflected on the cultural benefits of following the 8th Commandment. He wrote contrasting the dairy farm in the town in the Netherlands where he studied with a similar one in his village in India. In the Netherlands on the dairy farm there was an unattended shed where you could go dispense milk into containers you brought and leave the appropriate amount of money in a jar. He was struck by the level of trust there was, evidently due to a lack of theft, fraud or cheating on the producers or consumers part. This level of trust left resources to be used for further productive purposes.

In his village in India the similar dairy had at least one attendant and a security guard and it was subject to all kinds of red tape which the dairy in the Netherlands was not. He reflected on the cost of employing two people to prevent theft. He marveled that if the same level of trust existed in India as the Netherlands those resources could have perhaps employed those people to tend more animals or do something that added more to the wealth of the community rather than simply preventing theft. The economic benefit of a culture that obeys the 8th commandment is huge.

But there are other benefits as well. My Grandparents and mother and Father left my Grandparents house in Magnolia, Arkansas to go to church and my grandmother did not lock the door. My Mother said to my grandmother, “Lilian, did you forget to lock the door.” My Grandmother Lilian said “Oh no dear we leave it unlocked. What if someone wanted to drop something off (cookies on the table or a cream pie in the icebox). She left the door unlocked not simply because she felt like there was little risk of anything being taken but because somebody might want to bless them. How awesome is that. I would love to feel constrained about locking my door because I might hinder someone blessing us. Think how much less stress there would be, how much less suspicion there was, how much less energy and time is spent on security and can be put toward more positive things. That is a culture I want to live in one where the default is to open oneself up to leave inself vulnerable and so be able to impact others rather than one whose default is lock us away and occasionally opening the heart.

High trust societies are simply better off and part do they if you can trust your neighbor not to steal or cheat you. This of itself is a wonderful blessing.

Like with all the other commandments though true faithfulness to the 8th goes well beyond just not pick-pocketing my neighbor.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks this question: “What does God require in this commandment?” Answer: “That I do whatever I can for my neighbor’s good, that I treat others as I would like them to treat me, and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 111 https://www.rca.org/resources/heidelberg-catechism-ten-commandments).

This is what Jesus advocates for in the Sermon on the Mount. In a teaching on nonresistance, Jesus gives us this command: “Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you” (Matthew 5:42).

We should obey this command like the Bishop with a radically generous discerning heart. We are called to be wise but generous.

How am I going to give, spend and invest my money and property for the betterment of those that I am responsible for my family and my neighbor.

Sometimes this means giving money, food, time or space in your home away.

Sometimes it might mean if you run a business taking a chance on someone that you might not normally hire who needs a break.

Supporting Angle Tree from Prison Fellowship Ministries or Operation Christmas Child to bless children and families and spread the gospel.

Maybe it is investing in a business that might have a hard time attracting investment but would provide employment and income and be a benefit to the community

What could that look like. It could mean investing in individuals and communities encouraging businesses through a ministry like Hope International (<https://www.hopeinternational.org/about-us/our-mission>) which offers discipleship, skill training, the ability to save, loans for business and economic development. Some programs like Hope International offer a direct connection between the loaner and the recipient, some offer a return on the investment others do not but in any case wealth and stability is created within a poor community and our neighbor benefits.

It also means being the best cobbler you can be. One day a young cobbler, maker of shoes, came to Martin Luther and told him he had become a Christian and felt a call to serve the Lord. So he was wondering if he should become a preacher or something of that nature. After talking and praying with him Martin Luther said to him “You are a cobbler, make a good shoe and sell it for a fair price.” By doing so the man was using his skills to benefit his neighbor and keeping the eighth commandment. Benefit your neighbor by being the best teacher, lawyer, accountant, volunteer etc you can be. He did not lay out the details but if our heart is striving to benefit our neighbor than that will all work out.

We also should consider what this means for our life together. How do we through our social and political choices make sure that we collectively act in ways that we do not steal from but rather promote the welfare of our neighbor? Different political philosophies will lead us to different conclusions as to what this looks like but let the motivating factor be an effort to love others well, to protect the vulnerable from abuse and seek the good of our neighbor and wider community.

I know sincere people across the political spectrum for whom striving to do active good to their neighbor is the driving force behind their political choices. If the active betterment of our neighbor is our driving force we can find ways to work together,

In one respect the 8th commandments is simple in another its call is far deeper. The bare minimum is not to actively harm our neighbor through theft or fraud. In its fullness the eight commandments calls for us to live with a discerning generous heart that asks how can I with the resources I possess benefit my neighbor. Amen.