

I

Shortly after we arrived in Athens about six months ago, Amy and I went to the county tag office to transfer the titles on our cars from Texas to Georgia. The very helpful woman at the counter took our paperwork, punched a few numbers into her computer, and presented us with a bill for something called “Ad Valorem” tax. I looked at what the cost was going to be to tag and title 11-year-old, hail-damaged Toyota we affectionately call “The Golden Nugget,” and I asked the woman, “Did you miss a decimal point?”

She just smiled and said, “Welcome to Georgia.” We paid the bill, and a few days later, we received the Georgia title to “The Golden Nugget” in the mail.

The titles to our cars provide proof that we are the rightful owners of those vehicles. And after just 354 more monthly payments, Amy and I will receive a piece of paper that gives us title to the house and land at 126 Telfair Place here in Athens.

II

And we’re used to that idea, aren’t we? We’re used to the idea that we own things – we own cars and houses and furniture and clothes and all sort of stuff. And some of us, perhaps all of us, know what it feels like when something that rightfully belongs to gets stolen. It’s a feeling like there’s been a breach of the social contract, a violation of a public trust.

III

This summer, we’ve been making our way through a series of sermons we’ve titled, “Words to Live By” as we study The Ten Commandments. And the eighth commandment is just four words, given by God without a preamble or any rationale. You shall not steal. Period. Full stop.

As we’ve been making our way through, we’ve been learning a memory device for the Ten Commandments using our ten fingers. So let’s review what we’ve covered so far, shall we?

And full disclosure, this weekend, Amy and I were on a date night and the Ten Commandments came up in our conversation. I know, I’m romantic, aren’t I? And she was trying to recall them, and struggling a little with the order, until I reminded her of the memory device we’ve been learning, and then she got them all in exact order. So I promise, this thing may seem silly, but it really does work.

So put an index finger in the air, and notice that it looks like both the number one and the letter I. The Ten Commandments do not begin with “Thou shalt” or “Thou shalt not.” The Ten Commandments are about relationship, and so the first commandment begins with the word “I.” I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.

Now put up your pinky finger and notice that your hands look like bull horns. We read in Exodus that before Moses was even down from the mountain, the Israelites were already worshipping a golden calf. So the two horns remind us of the second commandment, “You shall not make for yourself any idols.”

Now take three fingers and notice that your hand also looks like the letter w, which is the first letter in wrongful. Now touch that w to your lips, and that reminds us that the third commandment is “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.”

Take the five fingers on your hand, and give your thumb a rest on your palm, and then tap your four fingers to your temple like you’re trying to remember something. And then you close your eyes and rest. The fourth commandment is, “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.”

Now imagine that you’re a small child, and you’re trying to reach way up to give a high five to your parents. The fifth commandment is, “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

The sixth commandment is, “You shall not murder.” This one is easy. Put up six fingers, and then take your index finger across your neck.

Last week, we covered the seventh commandment is, “You shall

not commit adultery.” Adultery involves the breaking of a promise. So take seven fingers. And then cross your two fingers and put them behind your back, as if you were promising something but had your fingers crossed.

And that brings us to today. Put up four fingers on each hand. Now take one hand and “steal” a finger from the other hand. The eighth commandment is “You shall not steal.”

Think about how many two- and-three-year olds you know whose favorite word is “Mine.” And an early lesson that caregivers must teach children is that not everything belongs to them. Some things belong to others, and we need to respect those boundaries. And the rationale we give to children is the golden rule – Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If you don’t like it when your brother takes your stuff, your brother doesn’t like it when you take his stuff.

As we’ve said all summer, the Ten Commandments are not just a set of rules, but a charter document for building a just and moral society. They are the framework around which God builds a holy nation, a royal priesthood, God’s covenant people. But besides all that, a blanket prohibition against theft just seems like good public policy.

#### IV

But here’s a theological and scriptural reality that I want you to consider this morning, my sister. You

may hold a title to a car, you may hold a title to a piece of property, but the theological reality is that you don't own a single thing.

The biblical reality, my brother, is that you don't own anything. Because Scripture teaches us that ultimately, God owns it all. Psalm 24 verse 1 says, "The earth is the Lord's, the world and those that live in it." A biblical worldview teaches that God is the owner of everything. God is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills. You don't own any of it. You are not the owner, but rather the manager of the things that God has entrusted to you. You are the caretaker, the steward, of the things of God.

When God gave the Ten Commandments at Sinai, our ancestors had nothing. As we say in the South, they were so broke they couldn't pay attention. They were completely dependent upon God their basic human needs like food and water.

And as they learned in those years in the wilderness, God is a trustworthy provider. For forty years, every day our ancestors ate their fill of manna and quail. For forty years, God brought forth fountains of water in the desert. In the wilderness, our ancestors learned that God finds a way, even when it looks like there's no way.<sup>1</sup>

And so everything you are, my sister, is a gift from God, a God who at this very moment knows how many hairs are on your head, God who created you and said, "This one is mine, with her I am well pleased." Everything you have, my brother, is a gift from God, who on the day you were baptized put an invisible stamp on you that says, "Property of YHWH, the Most High God."

Everything you have is not actually yours. It's God's, and God has entrusted it to you by God for your careful management, your faithful stewardship. Not just your stuff, but your relationships with your family and friends. Not just your bank account, but even your very body is a gift from God. And not just your body, but the air that fills your lungs with this very next breath. These are gifts from God who loves you so much that God would rather go to the cross for you than live without you.

God has given you everything you have, everything you are, and everything you will be. But God reserves all rights of ownership. And God is keenly interested in what you will do with the gifts of God.

Someday, I hope many years from now, the breath will leave your lungs, your heart will cease to beat, and you will stand before the judgment seat of God. And you will be called to give

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 16, 17

account for what you did with the gifts that God bestowed upon you.<sup>2</sup>

When we are hired to do a job, and while on the job we waste time, not only are we stealing from our employer, we are violating God's trust. When we hire someone to do a job for us, and we don't pay a fair wage, we are not just stealing from our neighbor, we are violating God's trust. When we fail to name and resist systems of oppression that deny our brothers and sisters access to basic human needs like food, water, shelter, and medicine, we aren't just stealing from them, we are violating God's trust.

And of course, when we acquire something through dishonest means, of course, we are also violating God's trust, for everything we have, everything we are, everything we have been, and everything we shall be, belongs to the Lord our God. At its root, stealing is an abdication of our responsibility for faithful stewardship.

## V

God is so incredibly, ridiculously generous. As the Apostle Paul asks in his letter to the Romans, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"<sup>3</sup>

Amy and I have three sons, and we love them with a depth of love I didn't know was possible until they

came along. We would trade our lives for theirs without giving it a second thought.

And yet in Scripture we read that God so loved the *world*, God so loved *the world*, as broken and messed up as it is, that God gave God's *only* Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have life in his name.<sup>4</sup>

I'm an educated man, but I just don't understand that kind of generosity. I just don't understand that kind of grace. I just don't understand that kind of love.

God love us, you and me, and God calls us into this thing called the church together. And God has been so incredibly generous to the First Presbyterian Church. But make no mistake, despite what the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church or the laws of the state of Georgia might say, this church does not belong to us, nor does it belong to Northeast Georgia Presbytery.

This church belongs to God. God is the owner of First Presbyterian Church, and you and I have been invited by God to be its stewards and caretakers, taking our place in a long line of generous, faithful stewards going back nearly 200 years now.

So may you and I continue to be faithful stewards of the gifts that have been entrusted to us. May we remember that a church is not a building, a church

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 25:19

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:32

<sup>4</sup> John 3:16

is a movement of people under the Lordship of Jesus Christ toward the kingdom of God.

So may we manage so faithfully that someday, when we are called to stand before the judgment seat of God and give an accounting for what we did with the gifts of God, we might hear a Voice say to us, “Well done, my good and faithful servants. You have been faithful in a few things; I will put you in charge of many. Enter into the joy of your Master.”<sup>5</sup>

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 25:21