

## **The Thief in the Mirror**

### **By David Feddes**

*You shall not steal. (Exodus 20:15)*

Meet the Robinson family: Robert, his wife Robin, and their thirteen-year-old son Robby. Robert works for an advertising agency, and his future looks bright. Why, just this week, after seeing Robert's latest design for a promotional campaign, his boss exclaimed, "Wow, Robert, have you got the touch! You make people who've never before heard of a product feel like they can't live without it. You sure know how to get people to part with their money." Robert beamed with satisfaction.

Thursday night, as the Robinsons were finishing supper, Robin said, "Guess what? Mimi Klepto next door just loaned me a bunch of new computer programs and games. She said we can copy whatever we want onto our hard drive. There's some great new software that I think we'll both like, Robert. And Robby, you're going to love the games. Oh, and Mimi also loaned me some movies and music albums to copy. All that stuff would cost us a fortune if we had to buy it at the store."

Friday evening, the Robinsons were on the road, hoping to enjoy a weekend away from home. As they drove, Robin patted her purse and said, "The Johnsons paid me today for painting their bedroom. I got paid in cash, as usual. That's another \$400 tax-free that the government will never know about."

The family pulled into a restaurant and enjoyed a fine meal. It tasted even better when Robert looked at the bill and noticed that they'd been undercharged by \$10. He chuckled and said, "Well, if they don't know how to add, that's their problem, not mine." The Robinsons then checked into a motel, and Robert put the room charge on his company's expense account.

Saturday morning the Robinsons went to the amusement park. The sign at the entrance said that kids twelve and under got in for \$5 less than older kids. Robby looked a bit small for thirteen, so Robin told the person at the gate, "Tickets for two adults and one twelve-year-old, please."

The Robinsons were standing in line, waiting to go on one of the rides, when suddenly Robin's purse was torn from her hands. Robin whirled around and saw a man racing away. She screamed, "Stop! Thief!" Robert galloped off in pursuit, but the thief had a head start and disappeared around the corner of a building. By the time Robert got to the corner, the thief had blended into the crowd. People were walking around as though nothing unusual had happened. Panting for breath, Robert hurried back to his distraught wife and son. "The guy got away," he gasped. "I can't believe this! Isn't there any place that's safe from crooks? The police ought to catch robbers like that and lock them up and throw away the key." Robin and Robby agreed.

### **Other People's Money**

In the Ten Commandments, God says, "You shall not steal." Most of us would say "Amen" to that—at least when it comes to people who might steal from us. Nobody likes to get robbed, but many of us don't mind robbing other people. Even if we're not burglars or purse snatchers, we're still thieves. Like the fictional Robinson family, we don't mind taking what isn't rightfully ours, but we're shocked and angry when someone

rips us off. It's okay to manipulate people to buy stuff they don't need. It's okay to copy software and videos we haven't paid for. It's okay to want to get rich quick on a something-for-nothing deal, to take cash income and not pay taxes on it, to keep the money when we're undercharged, to pad a company expense account, to cheat on the cost of admission for a child. That's all okay. But a purse snatcher? Now that's robbery! Police must get tougher on crime! Judges must sentence thieves to more prison time!

When God says, "You shall not steal," he's not just talking to somebody else. He's talking to you and me. You and I need to take a hard look in the mirror and at the values of the society we embrace. We may be guilty of a lot more stealing and freeloading than we'd like to admit. We may be as eager as anyone to get rich without working for it, to get maximum income for minimum work. Just about all of us fiercely oppose the ways others might steal from us, but we're much less upset about the ways we manage to grab other people's money.

Take Anthony, for example. According to news reports, Anthony walked into a New York bank with a gun and walked out with a bag full of cash. He left the bank and quickly blended in with the people walking on the sidewalk outside. But as Anthony was strolling along, someone brushed against him, grabbed the bag, and ran off with it. Anthony was furious. How dare someone steal the money he had just stolen for himself? He was so angry that he told the police what had happened. The police never caught the man who ran off with the money, but they did arrest Anthony for bank robbery.

We may laugh at a dimwit like Anthony, but is our own approach all that different? When we take from others, it's okay, but when someone steals from us, we're furious. Many of us try to grab what isn't ours in just about any way we can get away with, yet we squawk about the evils of crime. We'd like nothing better than to get piles of other people's money without having to work for it, and yet we complain that welfare bums ought to learn what honest work is all about.

Stealing is rampant in our society. I'm not just talking about break-ins, holdups, carjacking, and so forth. Those are the kinds of stealing that make the evening news, but ordinary people also steal. Workers take tools home from a business or factory, figuring a big business won't really miss them. Businessmen pad their expense accounts, thinking they deserve a little something extra. Citizens don't report taxable income, thinking they already give too much to the government.

Joy Davidman told how a shopkeeper explained business ethics to his son: "Suppose a customer buys something in a hurry. I give him change for ten dollars, but the minute he goes out I see he's given me a hundred dollar bill by mistake. Now here's the question of business ethics: should I tell my partner?"

### **A Steal of a Deal**

So far we've been focusing on examples of theft that are pretty clear-cut. They're common, we often don't think they're all that serious, we might not like to call them stealing—but that's what they are, and we know it. We know we're ripping someone off. But besides these clear-cut rip-offs, there are other, more subtle forms of stealing.

In the fine art of deal-making, the seller often pretends an item is worth more than it really is, while the buyer pretends it's worth less than its true value. In Proverbs 20:14, the Bible describes the bargaining process: "'It's no good, it's no good!' says the

buyer [when he's haggling about the price]; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase." Isn't that the truth? We like to brag when we get "a steal of a deal." Buy low; sell high. "That's not stealing," we tell ourselves. "It's just good business." But what if getting "a steal of a deal" really is stealing? Not all haggling over price is dishonest. Not every good investment is evil. Not all dealing is stealing, but sometimes it is—and more often than we'd like to admit.

When we come to the world of business and stock exchanges and future markets and government contracts and all the rest, it gets more complicated. It's not always easy to see where smart business ends and stealing begins. It's almost impossible to make and apply exact guidelines that would cover all the particulars. But just because it's complicated doesn't mean we should think anything goes. When a business wins a contract away from a competitor by pulling a few strings; when a company underpays its employees or overcharges its customers; when a corporation uses advertising to manipulate people into buying a useless product; when stock regulations and prices are manipulated for the advantage of insiders; when elected officials give inflated contracts to political contributors, or when government takes more of its citizens' money in taxes than it returns to them in benefits and services—that's stealing.

Sad to say, even religion itself can become the domain of thieves. The Bible often condemned religious leaders for using their position to manipulate people for their own profit. Jesus himself declared that God's temple had become a den of thieves. He grabbed a whip and went on a rampage through the temple area, overturning tables and driving out the rip-off artists.

That wasn't the last time manipulators have used religion to rob people. I remember hearing a TV preacher say that if you want to improve your financial situation, all you need is more faith. And how should you show this faith? Well, if you're in serious financial trouble, said the preacher, what you should do is scrape together \$150, and even if you think you can't afford it, send the \$150 to this preacher as proof of your faith. Then God will have no choice but to bless you and make you richer for showing such marvelous faith. Amazing! The preacher said all this with a straight face. He was trying to rob poor people of their last few dollars, using the name of the very Jesus who drove out the moneychangers. We ministers can't preach "You shall not steal" when we're overly eager to use religion to take away people's money.

### **Grabbers Becoming Givers**

In saying "You shall not steal," God condemns taking other people's money; he condemns the self-centered, lazy, greedy, something-for-nothing attitude that lies behind it; and he calls us to make our living through honest work. But he takes us even beyond that. According to the Bible, the command against stealing isn't concerned only with how we get our money. It also applies to how we use our money.

Ephesians 4:28 says, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need." God shows us that the opposite of stealing isn't not stealing; the opposite of stealing is sharing. If you're in tune with God, you won't just be honest and hard-working; you'll also be generous. God calls us to not be grabbers but givers. A grabber's attitude is, "What's yours is mine." A giver's attitude is, "What's mine is yours."

If you're able to make more money than you need, sharing isn't just an option. It's an obligation.

Maybe God has blessed you with the ability to be productive and make lots of money. If so, be thankful to God, and be generous with others. When God says, "You shall not steal," he's telling me to make money honestly and not rip off other people's money. However, he's also telling me to "do whatever I can for my neighbor's good, that I treat him as I would like others to treat me, and that I work faithfully so that I may share with those in need" (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 111).

How do we measure up to God's standard of sharing instead of stealing? Not very well, I'm afraid. We rob others in various ways, and when we think about what to do with our money, sharing is often the last thing that comes to mind. Our stealing may not be a big deal to us, but it is to God. In the Bible God says that "neither thieves nor the greedy ... will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9). Stealing is sin, and people who remain in sin end up in hell.

So how can we become right with God and leave stealing behind? Through a life-changing encounter with Jesus. The Bible tells the story of Zaccheus. He wasn't the kind of thief who got arrested and thrown in prison. He was a bureaucrat, a government tax collector in a corrupt system. He could overcharge people on their taxes and keep the extra for himself. Zaccheus had the power to take people's money and seize their property, and they couldn't do a thing about it. Zaccheus ripped people off. He got rich abusing the system. He was a thief but was never charged with any crime. Then he met Jesus.

Jesus came to Zaccheus's town and asked if he could come to his house. For some reason, Zaccheus was delighted, and he welcomed Jesus gladly. The people who saw this began griping. They wondered why Jesus would have anything to do with a rip-off artist like Zaccheus. They thought Zaccheus should be written off entirely. He was too wicked to be saved.

But Zaccheus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house... For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost. (Luke 19:8-9).

Salvation came to Zaccheus's house when Jesus came to his house. Jesus forgave his wicked, thieving past, and Zaccheus became a new man. The grabber became a giver.

If you look in the mirror and see a thief under God's judgment, you need to do what Zaccheus did. Welcome Jesus into your life. Receive his forgiveness. With his help, start living a new life. Be a giver, not a grabber. Then Jesus will tell you what he told Zaccheus: "Today salvation has come to this house."

*Originally prepared by David Feddes for Back to God Ministries International. Used with permission.*