

The Ten Commandments - 7

In terms of what the word usually suggests to us, most people would resist being called a thief and would hotly deny actions which could be called stealing. The popular idea of a thief is of some shifty character who slyly takes what belongs to others. And stealing is reckoned to be some definite thing such as happens in a supermarket or department store. We talk in terms of cars stolen and goods taken. Our newspapers speak of organised theft; of warehouses broken into and houses burgled. But this is about as far as it goes. Thieves are a criminal minority in the community, and few of us have first-hand knowledge of them.

This, as I say, is the popular idea of what thievery and stealing is all about. But let's stop for a moment. Many of us have had to fill out Tax return forms. The routine is a familiar one. We are required to declare our total income in one column and list against it, in another, legitimate deductible expenses. How many of those forms, however, give a totally honest and accurate picture? Could you say of yourself that every item of income has been accurately listed and every deductible expense a legitimate one? If not, then you're guilty of theft, as guilty (for all that you might strongly argue otherwise) as a person who has lifted something from a department store.

I suggest it's also worth thinking about the application of this Commandment on stealing where the sensitive area of industrial relations is concerned. There are of course two sides of the picture. There is the employer who hires labour and tries to get work done for the least possible outlay; who would rob his workers of even what is fair and reasonable in his chase after unjust and excessive profits. On the other hand there is the employee who does the least possible amount of work for the largest possible financial return. To accept a job is nothing less than to contract with an employer for so many hours of our time in return for an agreed wage or salary. To waste that time is to rob the employer of a return which is rightfully his. Here again you might argue strongly about the matter, and yet this is so.

Fortunately, we seem to have largely left behind the days of dishonest advertising; of adulterated goods and speedometers turned back in used cars up for sale. Acts of Parliament have been passed which protect the consumer in this way. And yet we are reminded by these things that anything which misrepresents a product or some object

we may have for sale; which causes people to make a purchase when, were they to know, they would not buy; is, again, stealing. There is no other word for it. And the person who does these things is a thief. The law may allow them, in certain circumstances, to get away with it. But they are still a thief.

One of our problems is that we don't give things their proper names. Our tendency is to think of such people as clever businessmen or slick salesmen and to congratulate ourselves when we pull off this kind of deal. We protest the use of terms such as fraud and stealing, though this is precisely what is involved. Maybe though, if we did use the proper terms we would have to face up more squarely to the nature of what we were doing. It's the same with adultery. People feel uncomfortable with the term. They prefer to talk of an "affair" because somehow this takes the edge off it all. And there lies the danger. If they gave it its proper name maybe they would have more of a conscience about it and more of a realisation of the nature of what they were doing.

In discussing the Commandments we have to be mindful of so multiplying the applications they carry, that we forget the essence of what is being got at. Yet there is no avoiding the countless ways in which we can steal and the vast implications this seventh Commandment carries. We can rob people of their happiness by constant criticism and unkind attitudes. We can rob a person of the praise which is rightly theirs by diverting it to ourself and by claiming that we were the architects of what has been accomplished. We can rob people of their good name and reputation; of their innocence, and most important of all, of their trust and faith in the Lord.

It is this latter point which is specifically meant by stealing at the more interior or spiritual level. Swedenborg wrote that "by stealing in the spiritual sense is meant to deprive another of the truths of their faith, and of the goods of their charity." (*Life 80*) It means to rob people of what are to them meaningful religious concepts; to question and confuse what they believe in; to suggest that human happiness and life in heaven can be obtained by other means. Ministers and priests do this who fail to confront their people with the Divinely revealed realities of the human situation, and the corresponding need for individual repentance and effort. Wherever there is a modification of truth and a playing down of its plain implications, there you have an incidence of spiritual theft, for the person concerned, be they priest, minister or teacher, is taking away from their listeners the means of their salvation. If, for example, I, as a minister, connived at adultery, I would be guilty of spiritual theft, for

I would have taken from the adulterer the means of their salvation; I would be implying that a certain truth (the truth about adultery) doesn't apply, when yet it does. For their eternal wellbeing and happiness is tied up with their obedience to it.

But apart from priests and ministers, all of us can steal in this way. The systematic and destructive criticism of another person's faith so that at last they don't know where they stand or what to believe in, amounts to spiritual theft. They have been robbed of their certain faith and sure convictions. And some, it seems, almost delight in doing this, in dismantling the beliefs of others because they haven't any beliefs themselves. To scoff at another's principles so that they themselves begin to doubt and question them is also a form of spiritual stealing; as is the deliberate endeavour to undermine another's conscience in inducing them to commit some evil.

In his treatment of this Commandment it was given to Swedenborg to warn of the ease with which the habit of stealing may be confirmed. "When" as he wrote "a person has of set purpose committed manifest thefts two or three times, he afterwards cannot desist from them." (*Arcana Celestia* 6203) At least not without deep and sincere repentance. The habit so quickly grows, and the first success whets the appetite for subsequent and more ambitious thefts. And the reason is that the evil, once committed, brings us into contact with influences from hell which then ever more urgently press upon us. These influences, it is said, 'do not let up, but obstinately bear in on a person, and cause them to think about that evil, at first occasionally, and afterwards as often as anything presents itself which is related to it.' (*Arcana Celestia* 6203)

And then there is this to be noted about thefts also. Because it is inevitably associated with cunning and deceit, "the evil of theft enters more deeply into a person than any other evil." (*Life* 81) The point is that once the idea of fraud and theft is accepted, quite apart from the fact of whether it is permissible by law or not, deceit and cunning take over, and the mind of the person is constantly set upon further schemes of personal profit and unlawful gain.

I have said in previous talks that insofar as we shun a particular evil and drive it out of our lives so does its opposite enter in and take its place. Insofar as we shun all impure and unchaste thoughts and behaviour, for example, so purity and chastity is able to enter in and be established with us. So too here. Insofar as we shun all forms

of fraud, unlawful gain and dishonest practices, so sincerity and honesty is able to be established with us. The rejection of the one makes room for the establishment of the other. As Swedenborg says, "How can anyone fail to see that the Lord cannot flow in from heaven with a person, and teach and lead them, until their evils are put away? For these stand in the way of, repel, pervert, and choke the truths and goods of heaven, which press, thrust and strive to flow in from a higher plane." (*Apocalypse Explained* 969)

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