

## ***Not Stealing is Not Easy***

Trinity CRC, November 6, 2022 AM

Ten Commandments series: Each One All-In for Jesus

Isaiah 58, Eph 4:25-28; LD 42

Rev. Richard deLange

### **Isaiah 58**

- <sup>1</sup> “Shout it aloud, do not hold back.  
Raise your voice like a trumpet.  
Declare to my people their rebellion  
and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.
- <sup>2</sup> For day after day they seek me out;  
they seem eager to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that does what is right  
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.  
They ask me for just decisions  
and seem eager for God to come near them.
- <sup>3</sup> ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,  
‘and you have not seen it?’  
Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?’  
“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please  
and exploit all your workers.
- <sup>4</sup> Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.  
You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.
- <sup>5</sup> Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for people to humble themselves?  
Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed  
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?  
Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?
- <sup>6</sup> “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?
- <sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
- <sup>8</sup> Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
- <sup>9</sup> Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;  
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.  
“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
- <sup>10</sup> and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,

and your night will become like the noonday.  
11 The Lord will guide you always;  
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land  
and will strengthen your frame.  
You will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.  
12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and will raise up the age-old foundations;  
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,  
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.  
13 "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath  
and from doing as you please on my holy day,  
if you call the Sabbath a delight  
and the Lord's holy day honorable,  
and if you honor it by not going your own way  
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,  
14 then you will find your joy in the Lord,  
and I will cause you to ride in triumph  
on the heights of the land  
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob."  
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

#### Ephesians 4:25-28

<sup>Eph 4:25</sup> Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. <sup>26</sup> "In your anger do not sin." Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, <sup>27</sup> and do not give the devil a foothold. <sup>28</sup> Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

#### **This is the Word of the Lord.**

Congregation loved by our Lord Jesus Christ,

Sometimes God calls our bluff! Sometimes God calls out our hypocrisy. Sometimes we're just so blatantly blinded to our own sinfulness that God says, "Wait a minute here folks! You're deceiving yourself into thinking you're a lot better than you are! It's time for a reality check!"

Isaiah 58 is one of those times where God calls his people's bluff. And it revolves around the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment on the one hand but focus on things pertaining to the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment which we are considering today. God in effect is saying to Israel—and to us— "Not stealing is not easy. It's not as easy as you think." It's part of the package of our whole life and can't be brushed aside.

In Isaiah 58, the Lord calls out his people's hypocrisy. You think you're so spiritual and godly because you fast and observe the Sabbath in some outward fashion. But there's something behind the scenes that you're oblivious too. Or at least you don't want to deal with that because it requires something of you. It'll cost you. It'll hit you in your wallet. And we all know how we don't like it much when something costs us but it doesn't seem to benefit us directly.

Here's God's dilemma with Israel. It starts in v.2

*Is 58:2 For day after day they seek me out;  
they seem eager to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that does what is right  
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.  
They ask me for just decisions  
and seem eager for God to come near them.  
3 'Why have we fasted,' they say,  
'and you have not seen it?  
Why have we humbled ourselves,  
and you have not noticed?'*

God is calling their bluff because Israel is saying, "Hey, God, what's up with you?" We're doing the right stuff. We're even fasting which is a sign of humbling ourselves before you. You like that, right? So, then, why aren't you answering our prayers?! We're doing what you want so shouldn't you do what we want?

## **Revelation**

As we consider this situation, let's look first of all at what God reveals about himself in the eighth commandment. Let's see what is troubling him about Israel's attitude and actions in that regard.

God calls out Israel in this chapter because the Lord looks at our heart and the actions that come from it. He's not only interested in religious rituals we perform. Good and important as those rituals or spiritual practices can be and are, they can't be used as a mask to cover up all we're doing wrong in the rest of our lives.

Remember that fairly famous—I think—quote from the Lord to Samuel as he looks to anoint Israel's next king. Samuel is impressed by the stature and stately look of some of Jesse's sons, especially Eliab. We read though,  
*1 Sam 16:7 But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."*

That's what God said in response to Israel's claims of righteousness for being so faithful in fasting. "What?!" says God. Here's the problem. V.3 and following.

*3b "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please  
and exploit all your workers.  
4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.  
You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.  
5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for people to humble themselves?  
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed  
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?  
Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?"*

God mentions exploiting your workers as a clear sign that Israel is violating the eighth commandment while thinking they have such a good relationship with God because they fast, even putting on sackcloth and laying in ashes. The heart of the eighth commandment is

injustice. Looking like a saint on the Sabbath is one thing. But your heart is not really set on doing what God commands. After all, says the Lord to Israel, “You live like the devil when you oppress people the rest of the week.” The Lord elaborates what justice looks like beginning in v.6 and puts a new twist on fasting:

*Is 58:6 “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:*

*to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?*

*<sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

Clearly, not stealing from our neighbour is not easy when we listen to God’s revelation of his heart for humanity in this chapter. He’s saying that he considers it stealing when we take part in acts that include active injustice as well as passively turning our eyes away from injustice and doing nothing about it. This is God’s heart because he loves all people, whether we are rich or poor, slave or free, good looking and tall like Eliab or not so hot and short, or any other way we distinguish ourselves. God loves people and wants us to care for one another. That’s why he hates all forms of stealing.

## **Confrontation**

That bring us to how the Lord is confronting us with our sin in this “do not steal” commandment.

Where’s the rub for you? For me it was thinking about how I can so easily dismiss the needs of the poor in our society. What do you hear when I read this verse again from Ephesians 4. Verse 28:

*Eph 4:28 Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.*

The first and most obvious reading points to the thief. Stop stealing. Change your ways by the power of Jesus living in you. Put off the old nature—stealing—and put on the new nature—serving others. Do something useful to help others now. I like to hear Paul chastising and instructing the criminal.

But what about if I’m the criminal too? Maybe I haven’t actively stolen money or property from someone else, but I have definitely done so passively. I’m part of the system in our world that tends to favour the rich and oppress the poor. I’m among the rich when it comes to worldwide economics. So, I smile when I watch the new leader of the Conservative Party of Canada, Pierre Poilievre, masterfully and rightfully call out our Prime Minister for spending \$6000 a night for a hotel while claiming to care about the poor in our country. Calling out such hypocrisy makes me feel good about myself. But what about if I’m also hypocritical? I can drive by poor people every day and ignore their plight. I can say in light of Ephesians 4, “They should work and do something useful with their hands.” I hear Christians say things like that all the time. But maybe the last part of that verse applies to me too. I am working and making a good living. But am I sharing with those in need?

I’ve heard statistics at different times that tell how the poorest people among us are the least greedy. Percentage wise, they are more generous than the rich. For a poor person to give

away 10% might be a lot more sacrificial than a millionaire giving away \$100,000. The dollar amount is much less when the poor give it but the percentage they give is often higher. And who gets the applause for their generosity? The rich. Even that is unjust. No one necessarily needs recognition for their giving. Jesus said our left hand shouldn't know what our right is doing in that regard.

What's important here is whether I'm willing to evaluate my own lifestyle in light of the hard plight of so many in our world. What gives me the right to live comfortably while others subsist in abject poverty? Does it even bother me, for example, that one in six people in the world lives on less one dollar a day? Let's be honest. Many of us would scream if we had to live on less than \$100 a day or even \$40 or \$50. We can take into account the climate we live in and the cost of living here but there's still something grossly unjust in this picture, isn't there? Living out the spirit of the eighth commandment is not easy.

This goes so much deeper than money. We can think about justice in relation to the environment too. Is it **just** when major polluters in one part of the world lack environmental stewardship which effects people elsewhere, perhaps causing their land to produce less and threatening their livelihood and lives? Economically, is it just when rich countries have policies or practices that actually keep poor countries poor? Is our desire in the western world to keep growing our wealth okay even it when it comes at the expense of someone else? These are complex matters. But we need to think about them as God's people rather than simply brush them aside without a second thought. When Jesus calls us to love our neighbours, it means people all over the world. Paul's words encourage us share with those in need. That call is for every Christian serious about following Jesus.

There are so many ways that this commandment to not steal calls us to live with an eye on—and our heart for—the well being of our neighbours. In this way, not stealing is not easy. It confronts us on many different levels.

## Instruction

So, then, what instruction can we take away from this commandment? How does God want us to live in light of this not so easy command, "Do not steal?" I think it helps us to think about the flipside of not stealing.

Think of some things God highlights in Isaiah 58. There's so much in that chapter that's worthy of a whole sermon. But let me repeat a few of the lines:

<sup>6</sup> *loose the chains of injustice*

*...set the oppressed free*

*...break every yoke...*

<sup>7</sup> *...share your food with the hungry*

*provide the poor wanderer with shelter—*

*when you see the naked, ...clothe them,*

*and do not turn away from your own flesh and blood.*

Farther down the Lord mentions things like:

*...do away with the yoke of oppression,*

*with the pointing finger and malicious talk,*

<sup>10</sup> *...spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry*

*and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,*

There are no surprises in that list really, are there? But it's such good reminder. Not stealing means caring for the poor, working for justice in our world, including underlying causes. Let me summarize the instruction with two short statements: Be thoughtful. And be generous.

Be thoughtful: One of the biggest judgements we often make is that the poor are poor by their own doing. That's sometimes true but mostly not. It's a lie we tell ourselves because it makes us feel okay about the plight of the poor. It's telling ourselves that they got themselves into that situation so they can get themselves out.

I remember growing up and thinking the term "lazy Indian" was normal and a correct assessment of the indigenous peoples. I've hopefully learned more about them since then and I still have a lot more to learn. It's fair to say, though, that the oppression of the colonists has driven our indigenous peoples down. They were hardworking people who lived off the land and took good care of the land. They were good stewards of creation. White people, however, saw them as unsophisticated savages and pagans, even enemies. And I don't know how they viewed the white man at first. But clearly the relationship went bad. Now today we have a long list of atrocities that have led to the breakdown of the indigenous peoples who often live in poverty in our country. I don't pretend to have all the answers or even know all the questions. I just know that my attitude needed to change and still needs improvement. But it won't happen until I start to be more thoughtful. I have to be willing to criticize my own biases and stereotypes and the lies I've believed.

Until I see all people as image bearers of God, worthy of God's good gifts for humanity, I'll think my way is the best way. But increasingly I think our western culture has many more vices than we tend see. We have idolized wealth and made it the goal for true living. But the love of money is the root of all evils. No, not money itself. It's the love of money. And our society on many levels is built on the love of money, instead of the love of God and our neighbour, as it should be.

As Christians, we need to be willing to evaluate how we've bowed to this idol and to think about what God is asking us to do. If God has the best way for us to live—and he really does—then we should be ready to be thoughtful about how we are living and how our life choices either help or hurt our neighbours. So let's be thoughtful.

Secondly, we should work at being generous. We might think that we tithe so we are generous. Well, tithing is good. If you're faithfully tithing to the Lord, then I suspect that you have almost certainly discovered that God does provide for you. When you tithe, you are on the road to being generous. The thing about generosity is that it does cost us a lot, but it doesn't feel like it.

That's the thing about the economics of the kingdom of God. It'll never make sense on a financial spreadsheet. If I have one dollar on a spreadsheet and give away 10 cents, then I have 90 cents left. But generous people love being generous because they keep on being amazed at how God provides for them. A generous person will never say, "I gave 10 cents of my dollar away and now I only have 90 cents for myself." They are more likely to say, "I can't believe how God blesses my giving. I gave 25 cents away from my dollar but I still have plenty. In fact, in some ways I feel like my 75 cents goes farther than a dollar would have if I hadn't given away 25 cents in the first place."

Cultivating generosity happens by doing it. Look up Malachi sometime and you'll discover that the Lord tells us to test him and see if he does or doesn't bless generosity. We'll discover—if we haven't already—that he does.

You see, the Lord is calling us to get away from bondage to the love of money and to greed which lie at the root of stealing. That's something we can learn to do by being generous.

Start thinking more about others without being judgemental. It's not **only** about giving away money. It's about learning how to love people who find themselves in very different circumstances than you are in. Being generous with your attitude and judgements, with your time and space, and even your money. That cultivates generosity.

This is an economically tough year. Lots of people are looking for help with groceries, gas and even rent. What would it look like for our church to do more to help the poor? Should we double the number of Christmas hampers for our neighbours this year? Should we all give up some of our Christmas spending and give that money to World Renew? Grab one of these gift catalogues and look at how you can bless people around the globe. Most of us here don't need more stuff. We'd find more blessing in giving money away than in getting more stuff for ourselves.

Cultivating generosity happens as well when we stop comparing **up** all the time and start comparing down. We seem to always think the people who have more than us are really living and really enjoying life. I can't speak for everyone. But that's often not the case. Sometimes the more we have, the more miserable we are too. We spend our time worrying about all our things and looking down on everyone we think is out to get our stuff from us. We may have worked very hard and gotten everything through our own sweat. Nothing wrong with that. But we aren't necessarily happier just because we have so much. We often assume "more" makes us happier. So we compare up and simply want more so we give less.

In my experience, it works the opposite. I can think of mission trips I've been on to Cuba and Nicaragua where I saw people who didn't have much but were generally very happy and generous. While I could see them longing for more wealth because poverty is hard, they still seemed to have a great sense of contentment with what they had and overall joy in the simple things of life, like family and friends and church and people in general. Their loving relationship go deeper than their pockets. So try to cultivate generosity. Don't hoard. Learn to become a cheerful and generous giver.

Being generous is about learning not to hoard for ourselves. It's about using what God has given us to be a blessing to others. It's about lifting up the broken who can't lift themselves up. It's getting deeper into the spirit of Isaiah 58 where we use what we have to help people out of their poverty and to help people break free from oppression. It's about fighting the kind of injustice that keeps people down.

Thoughtfulness and generosity will grow our hearts bigger. As we follow God's instruction, we'll discover that not stealing is complicated but living for the good of our neighbour—yes, sacrificing for them—is going to serve them well. And we will be blessed ourselves. It's God's economics at their best.

## **Promise**

Now then, what's the promise that goes with this commandment? I'll answer that by saying, the Lord's favour. I don't want this to sound like a health and wealth gospel because it's not. That is a false gospel. The Lord's favour isn't a promise of wealth. But it's clear from Isaiah 58 that God makes promises to his people when they get their hearts in the right place with respect to how they love God and their neighbour.

Most importantly, however, the promises in this chapter point us to our need for Jesus. Just as this chapter is largely about the justice God wants his people to embody in the world, it reminds us of the ultimate justice that is required for God to set the whole world aright. Isaiah, writing around 700BC, knows that the Messiah of Isaiah 53 has not yet come, but that he will come. And when he comes, he will bear our sins of injustice. He'll be bruised for our iniquities and bring us peace with God.

Jesus has mercy on us in our sin and, through his sacrificial love in dying on the cross, he settles the demands of God's justice. In doing so, we by faith in him receive the power to live new lives, as we hear from our reading in Ephesians 4 and other places in the New Testament. Only through Christ can we put off sin and begin to live unto God by caring for our neighbour. Jesus changes us from stealers to people who long to serve others in his name.

As we do this, a little more of the kingdom of God shines through. As we practice selfless living, sacrificial giving, and love to those who are in poverty and oppression, the light of Jesus shines through. He enables us to begin to live as he did, raising up the broken and loving the lepers and all those he calls "the least of these" in Matthew 25. Friends, Isaiah 58 helps us see that God promises that the church today will break forth like the light of the dawn when our faith in Jesus produces a passion for social justice that works itself out in deeds of mercy in our world—when we begin to have a heart for the broken the way that Jesus did.

I've been the pastor at this church for almost 13 years now. Does that seem crazy to you? It does to me. The time has flown by. And we've seen many, many blessings in those years. I've pondered and puzzled over God's blessings to us many different times. I keep wondering if there's a secret formula that we've hit on. I don't think there is such a thing. But I do know that God honours people who seek to do his will. People who worship him not only on Sunday but whose heart is set on justice and other ways of showing love to our oppressed neighbours.

Now that doesn't always result in pleasant things. The early church was clearly doing God's will and it resulted in lots of persecution. That, in turn, did lead to huge growth in the church. I'm just saying that God's blessing doesn't always look like we think it should.

Looking back, I believe the Lord has blessed our efforts to get the Mosaic Centre up and going. That's been a blessing to many of the needy people in this part of our city. It brings a smile to the face of God as it brings a little bit more of heaven to earth. It's an example of God's people living kingdom-minded lives; not thinking about what we're giving away but thinking about the needs out there which our generous gifts address. We've been participants in a ministry that is lifting up the broken so that in God's eyes we are restorers of the broken.

We should never lose that concern or feel overwhelmed because it never seems to be enough. That's true. Our best efforts only bring glimpses of the kingdom in its fullness. But Jesus promises we will enjoy the fully when he returns again. In the meantime, even our small efforts at grace, love and justice are met with God's blessing.

Friends, God cares about how we care for the poor and needy. Clearly, God is not interested in our acts of piety whether worship or fasting when we turn our back on the vulnerable and/or actively or even passively participate in their oppression. That is hypocrisy which he calls out in Isaiah 58. A heart that is full of God's love and the grace that is ours in Christ will flow—yes, overflow—in acts of love for our neighbour. Not stealing is not easy. But it does flow out of the grace that is ours through Jesus.