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**The Lamp of Our Being**  
**Exodus 20: 15**

An Armenian folk tale speaks of some young girls who ran out of a cave in a state of fright. Their flight attracted the attention of six robbers, who asked the girls what was the matter. The girls said, "We came from a cave where we found a 'soul stealer.'" The robbers said, "A 'soul stealer?' Come, show us this cave; we would love to see this 'soul stealer.'" So, the girls led them into a cave where there was a great tub of gold, too heavy and too large for six men to lift. The robbers said to the girls, "Ah, ya'll can go away; we'll take care of the 'soul-stealer' for you." The girls were all too happy to run away, while the six robbers could not believe their good fortune. Three decided to go into town to buy food to celebrate. Three would guard the gold. On the way to town the three on the road hatched a plan. "After we eat a big meal, let us poison the food we take back to the others. More gold for us!" But while these robbers hatched their plan, their compatriots were hatching a similar scheme. When the robbers returned from town, the others jumped upon them and killed them. Then the murderers ate the poisoned food, and they died. When the young girls returned to the cave a couple of days later, they found the six bodies. They said to each other, "See, we were right -- it is a 'soul-stealer.'" And they wisely ran from the cave again.

The Eighth Commandment says simply: "Thou shalt not steal."  
It condemns a physical action – but its real purpose is to save our souls.  
Our Lord Jesus was offering us commentary on the Eighth Commandment when he said, "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matthew 6: 22-23)

Jesus makes many brilliant observations about human nature, but this is among his most incisive. He notes that what our eye delights in is what governs our being. You can find evidence of this universal truth all around you. Not long ago the *Observer* told of a woman who was caught shoplifting about \$50 worth of merchandise from a Cotswold store. That's hardly startling news: it happens all the time. Except this woman was already awaiting sentencing for having been recently convicted for spearheading a far-reaching prostitution ring in which she had reaped millions. Having seen her own life and that of others as a means of stealing a fortune, she could not break the habit of trying to steal her way through life. Arrest, scandal, and public humiliation had not been able to dispel the great darkness within her. Truly, she has stolen her own soul.

On the other hand, consider the example of Michael Thompson, an amateur golfer who is hardly a household name, but who was in a great position to make the cut at this year's Masters. As he stooped over a putt, he noticed that the wind moved the ball ever so slightly. His partners did not see it; even the slow-motion tv cameras could hardly register the ball's movement. But the young golfer saw it and called a one-stroke penalty upon himself. He missed the cut. Could he have gotten away with not calling the penalty?

Sure. But he knew that would be stealing from the game.

His eyes were full of light.

Intuitively, he honored the Eighth Commandment's recognition of the three-layered nature of stealing: thievery entails stealing from other people, stealing from the values of God and stealing one's own soul.

Michael Thompson refused to do this.

Oddly enough, some have regarded the Eighth Commandment as the least ethical of the Ten Commandments.

Some have complained that the Eighth Commandment is a baptizing of the status quo, a protecting of the haves against the have-nots.

Such would be a gross misreading of Biblical history.

The Eighth Commandment sets forth an ethic of integrity on behalf of the powerless against the powerful.

Think of Elijah chastising King Ahab for stealing the vineyard that belonged to lowly Naboth.

A Biblical commentator has said that this scene could not have happened in any other Middle Eastern court.

Elsewhere, Elijah would have been killed immediately or slowly tortured.

But in the Hebrew culture, where the principle of ownership was universally established, the powerful were not to use their leverage to deprive the powerless of fruits gained through their labor.

Hebrew culture knew that the Eighth Commandment enjoined the powerful from using their power to take from the poor and give to the rich.

Theft is about so much more than property. Theft reflects our relationship with God.

It reflects what we value.

St. Augustine's *Confessions* were written in the fourth century,

but they sound like they were published yesterday. In fact, he lays open the soul of a shoplifter.

He talks of when he was sixteen and snuck into his neighbor's garden and stole her pears.

He admits that he acted neither out of hunger, necessity or need.

He did it simply to delight in doing wrong. The pears tasted sweet because they were forbidden.

He tasted them, then threw them away. "The evil was foul within me," said Augustine, "and I loved it."

He saw his theft as imitating the power of God.

Yet as he came to a measure of self-understanding, he described himself

as a slave who was running from his true master, chasing a shadow.

As he came to know God's call, he came to realize that his eye was full of darkness.

Ya'll know how I love stories. Years ago, I came upon this story,

and when I think about theft, this is the story that speaks to me most powerfully.

Some years ago a young man named Frank entered a prestigious eastern university

and was assigned to room with a young man named Paul.

Frank came from cultured, monied roots; Paul's father was an uneducated businessman who had made a fortune as a manufacturer and sent his son to school only as concession to the boy's mother.

The father fixed the boy on a very small stipend, so Paul started borrowing money from Frank, and over time this sum grew sizable. It was not until the end of the freshmen year that Paul finally paid Frank back.

At the beginning of his sophomore year, Frank discovered that Paul was not coming back to school.

Moreover, he discovered that many of his friends in the fraternity and dorm had loaned sizable sums to Paul and had not been repaid. Paul's name became synonymous with "scoundrel" and "thief" in their class's private lexicon. Many years passed.

Frank was on the dais at a fifteen-year reunion of this same college class, and he was getting ready to introduce the main speaker when someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to see a small mustachioed, professorial-looking man.

"Frank," the man said, "It is me, Paul. I am not drunk. I am not here to make trouble.

But I would like to say a word to the group after the speaker finishes -- would you let me speak?" Frank, who had a great appreciation for drama, said, "Absolutely. I'll even introduce you."

The main speaker gave his talk, and no one would remember it.

But then Frank stood and said, "Gentlemen, the man who stands before you next needs no introduction. We have talked of him often in past years years. He stands before you now. I give you Paul."

The little man stood upon the dais. He said, "I know that among all of you, my name means one thing. I am the man who didn't pay his debts.

When I borrowed all that money I had a plan to pay every one of you back.

By the middle of that summer long ago, I knew my plan had failed. I didn't have the courage to go to my father to ask for money. I didn't have the courage to face you. So I hopped a freighter around the world and ended up in China, where I worked for a while and made money. As crazy as my tale might seem, as I was leaving that country I was robbed by river bandits who stole everything I had down to my underwear, save for a precious scrap of paper which meant nothing to them but everything to me.

By many adventures I made my way to Switzerland. I became an English instructor.

Eventually, I became a full professor. I married a Swiss girl who is also a teacher, and we have four lovely children. But even though professors don't make much money in Switzerland, I put a little bit aside here and there over the years, looking toward this night when I could stand before you with enough money in my pocket to pay each one of you back." Then he pulled out a crumpled, badly-faded sheet of paper upon which was the name of every person from whom he had borrowed and how much he owed them.

Needless to say, everyone in that room rose in acclamation and praise.

Here was a man who understood that if one's eye is sound, then the whole of one's body is full of light.

Here is a man who felt in the marrow of his bones, "Thou shalt not steal."

He knew that for him not to repay his debts would be not just a sin against his friends; he would be stealing his own soul.

His sense of stewardship, his sense of responsibility to those he had betrayed,

so governed his life that he said in all sincerity that night, "I thank God for the chance to stand before you."

He knew that in keeping faith with these people he was keeping faith with the best of himself.

It might interest you to know that the "Frank" who came to tell this story many times is known to history by another name. We call him FDR, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The example of his friend Paul came to have great influence in shaping his understanding of integrity.

"Thou shalt not steal."

This is not just a principle about respecting property, about respecting what I have and what you have.

It is a commandment that reminds us that what we have been given is given to us for the common good.

We are not meant simply to accrue for ourselves.

God intends for us to pour it out in service unto others.

We are not meant to accrue what we have for the purpose of stealing the future of others.

There was once a mayor in Toledo in the 1930's during the depth of the Great Depression

whose name was "Golden Rule Jones." Periodically, he would go down and preside at the police court.

One wintry day he saw the police bring in a man who was charged with stealing groceries.

The man pleaded guilty, saying that had he no excuse save that he had no money and no job.

The mayor said, "I've got to fine you. You stole, not from the community responsible for these conditions, but from a particular man. So I fine you \$10.00."

Then the mayor pulled ten dollars out of his pocket, saying, "Here's the money to pay your fine."

Then he picked up his hat and handed it to the court's bailiff.

He said, "Now I'm going to fine everybody in this courtroom fifty cents, or as much as you happen to have on you, for living in a town and a society where a man has to steal groceries in order to eat. Bailiff, go through the courtroom and collect the fines, then give them to the defendant."

Here is a man who understood the full nature of the Eighth Commandment.

He understood that our material possessions are not merely ours, for we must exercise stewardship over what we have for the good of all God's children. What we have been given we are meant to share.

The twentieth century saw a fierce debate between communism and capitalism.

Communism said ownership is inherently unjust. Capitalism said ownership is inherently good.

Capitalism won the argument! But this twenty-first century will see another great debate.

The challenge of our century will be addressing the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

We must address the widening gulf between those who enjoy resources sufficient to fund a decent life and those who lack such funds.

If we do not address that gap, we will find a world that soon devolves into political and social upheaval.

What we have has not been given to us that we might steal from the future of others.

What we have been given has been loaned to us that we might use it for God's glory and service.

The rich young ruler comes to Jesus, asking, "What must I do to inherit the Kingdom of God?"

Jesus rattles off the commandments, "Do not commit adultery. Do not kill. Do not steal."

"Yes, yes, I've kept all of these," the young man replies.

"Fine," says Jesus, "then surrender all that you have to the poor and follow God."

The young man cannot do it.

He thinks he has been serving God with his righteousness,

but he really has been serving himself,

and he has been stealing from God the future that God desires for him.

"Thou shalt not steal," means that we are not to steal our lives away from God's intent.

For our lives belong to God.

The mystics of the early Christian era coined a powerful phrase:

"You must put your head inside your heart."

Those crazy mystics realized that at some point we must do away with our material, calculating schemes and allow our heart to purify our motives enough to see God's intent for our lives.

Put your head inside your heart. Your eye has to be full of light.

A few years ago, a young woman was looking at some old photographs and said to me, quite innocently,

"Gosh, Dr. Kremer, you were really handsome when you were younger."

What do you say to that? Uh, thank you?

I said to her, "Time takes all things." Indeed it does.

Time is a thief. It takes from us our looks, our athleticism, our health, our memory, and eventually, the people we love. Time makes us realize that everything we enjoy is loaned to us only for a period.

Jesus says to us, "Let your eyes be light, for if your eyes are light, your souls will be full of light."

Daily, we should hold a crumpled little piece of paper in our hands that reminds us,

"You live indebted to God."

We live indebted to God!

If we keep before our eyes the values of God,

then we will not try to steal from God the life that God has designed for us.

But if our light is darkness, how great is that darkness!

"Thou shalt not steal!"

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