

## Laws of Intended Consequences: Hands Off!

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"You shall not steal." -- Exodus 20:15

I once saw a tee-shirt that said, on the front, "This land is my land, this land is your land," and on the back it said, "We stole it from the Indians fair and square."

I saw that tee-shirt back in the early 1980s, in the small college town of Bloomington, Indiana. In those days, in places like Bloomington, we were still wrestling with ideas that called into question the cultural *Zeitgeist*, that didn't endorse the status quo. In those days, some of us still wrestled with the disastrous legacy of European colonialism as it affected Native and African Americans. We were naïve enough to think that we could and should do something to right old and widespread wrongs, starting with calling attention to the wrongs themselves.

We Americans of European ancestry don't like to think of ourselves as the recipients of stolen property, but it's otherwise hard to explain how North America went from being theirs – the Wampanoags', the Wyandots', the Cherokees', the Aleuts' – to being ours – property of the Smiths, the Joneses, the McAfees, and the Schmidts.

Colonialism is the polite academic term for the process. A stronger group takes over the territory and natural resources of a weaker group. It's a type of exploitation, more or less brutal, depending on the exploiter and the response of the exploited. That's what happened here. The Spanish, the French, the English – they all wanted a piece – preferably the largest piece – of this vast land mass that you and I are worshiping on this morning.

Beginning in the late fifteenth century – we all learned the fateful date as school children, 1492 – Europeans sent fleet after fleet of colonists, conquistadors, adventurers, explorers, entrepreneurs, freebooters, and missionaries – let's not forget the missionaries – and for the next 300 or so years, the Europeans spilled from their *Ninas, Pintas, Santa Marias, and Mayflowers* onto the shores of land already occupied by others and began to claim it for themselves.

It's a sad story, very well known, and by the time the last shots had been fired, the French owned the north – they kept the Iroquoian name and called it Canada – the English owned the middle – that would eventually include us here in Richmond Heights – and the Spanish owned everything south of Florida.

The native inhabitants had been wiped out by warfare or disease, had been reduced to slavery, or had been herded onto reservations. And when the natives fought to keep not only their land and water but also their entire way of life, our ancestors called them savages and redoubled their efforts at genocide.

We Christians have a great deal of innocent blood on our hands, not only in

the neighborhood but around the globe. We claim to be followers of the Prince of Peace, but the comic genius Mel Brooks came closer to describing the historical reality of our behavior in his famous send-up of Hitler in *To Be or Not To Be*, when Hitler sings that all he wants is a little peace: “A little piece of Poland, a little piece of France, a little piece of Austria, and Hungary, perchance!” Peace, peace, we say, we all want a little piece.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is one of those courageous Christians who's not afraid to stare down the history of which we Christians have been such a tragic part, and see it for what it is. He frequently reminds the world, “When the missionaries came to Africa, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the Bible. They said, 'Let us pray' and we closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land.”

Africa, Canada, Virginia, Mexico, Hawaii – it's the same story in a hundred variations, all of them in violation of the eighth commandment, “You shall not steal.”

Biblical scholars think that these last three commandments – prohibiting theft, false witness, and coveting – are all related to property. That's easy to see in the eighth and tenth commandments, but even that ninth commandment -- “You shall not bear false witness” -- may have had to do with property originally. It had to do with not perjuring oneself in court so as to defraud someone else.

And this eighth commandment, prohibiting stealing, it may originally have had to do with kidnapping, but gradually it was expanded to include non-human property. The prohibition against stealing was intended to help keep the peace – let's agree that what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours so we don't have to keep clubbing each other – but the problem is we've never been able to come to that kind of agreement. We do not agree that this belongs to me and that that belongs to you because ownership is created by rules, and the rules are constantly being re-written.

Let's go back to what we think the original eighth commandment might have been – thou shalt not steal . . . a person. How do you steal a person? We don't think of people as property that can be stolen, but that's a very recent way of looking at people.

For most of human history, people did regard other people as property, at least under certain circumstances. In the Bible, for instance, women, children, and slaves were all considered a man's property, which is why, until fairly recently, the first question a minister asked in a wedding ceremony was, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” A father literally gave his daughter away to another man, usually in exchange for a hefty bride price that the groom's family paid the bride's family. There's a great deal of economic anthropology behind all of this, but the bottom line is that women in the Bible were regarded as property that could be and was exchanged between males. So much for the good ol' days.

Today, we don't regard people as property – one person does not own another – but we as a nation nearly had to destroy ourselves in a civil war to reach that point. And the people who owned the slaves had by far the stronger case when it came to arguing the merits of slavery from the Bible.

Nowhere does the Bible prohibit slavery, and as much as I'd like to think that Jesus would have opposed the "peculiar institution" -- as I do -- I doubt that the thought even would have occurred to him. He was a first-century Palestinian Jew who accepted slavery as a given, not only in his world, but in the world, period. Slavery is how much of the ancient world's work got done, for thousands of years, and if it hadn't been for the industrial revolution, it's very likely that we would be living with slavery today. The steam engine did as much to end slavery as Abraham Lincoln did, perhaps more.

So while the eighth commandment may prohibit us from taking as our own that to which we are not entitled, it's not at all clear that we all agree on what it is any of us is entitled to, as individuals or as groups.

Once upon a time -- and that would be less than a century ago -- we believed that we were entitled to as much of the earth's natural resources as we wanted -- not as we needed, but as we wanted. If we could extract it -- mine it out, drill it out, or cut it down -- we could have it.

But that understanding is changing. Many of us no longer think that our generation owes nothing to generations yet to come. Or, better, that those generations also have property rights which we are obliged to respect. When you cut down the forests, for instance, faster than you plant new ones or allow new ones to grow, eventually you're going to run out of wood, and if you are one of those people living in that generation we know as "eventually," you may very well consider yourself robbed of something to which all of earth's inhabitants are entitled. And some of us in this generation would agree with you.

Could we not agree that we're all entitled to life's basics -- food, water, clothing, shelter? If we are, then why is it such a pitched battle in Congress to pass legislation that guarantees that children will not go hungry? If children are entitled to food, and we're cutting the funding that provides it, is that not a form of theft? Are we not taking something that someone else is entitled to?

What about education? The Supreme Court of Ohio has ruled repeatedly that the way schools are funded in our state is unconstitutional because it deprives children in poor and minority neighborhoods of the opportunity to get an education that will allow them to compete for jobs and professional schools. Yet the legislature refuses to revise the laws; is that not taking from our poor and minority children something that is legitimately theirs -- namely, opportunity? Isn't opportunity what we say everyone in this country has -- an equal shot, a comparable chance, a level playing field? When we take that away, are we not stealing?

It's easy to carry with us through life the definition of stealing we learned when we were four or five -- taking the candy bar we didn't pay for at the corner convenience store, for instance. And as we grow up, some of us complexify our understanding of theft to include things like padding our invoices or lifting words and ideas from someone else's speech and delivering them as if they were your own. Okay, we get all of that -- don't steal.

But when it comes to historical thefts, or thefts from those we don't see face-to-face, or thefts committed by groups of which we are a part, or thefts of someone's opportunity -- then we become hesitant and confused and unwilling.

But the eighth commandment prohibits all the ways we deprive others of what legitimately is theirs – not according to our lights, but according to God's lights. These are, after all, God's laws, given to us to help us be the kind of people God asks us to be.

The eighth commandment doesn't conform to the way we draft legislation, or draw congressional boundaries, or steer funding toward the successful rather than where it's needed. The eighth commandment prohibits stealing from the future as well as receiving goods that others have stolen in the past. The eighth commandment prohibits us from scheming and dreaming of ways to enrich ourselves at the expense of others. When we condemn many of God's children to poverty so that a tiny fraction of us might live in luxury – that's taking from them the opportunity for them to live their “one wild and precious life” in a way that is legitimately theirs. That's stealing, and it's wrong.

Friends, there are lots of ways to steal, and the very simple eighth commandment -- “You shall not steal” -- tells us to avoid them all.