

Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment

By John VanSloten
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(INTRO 0:00 – 1:19 to fade) As you've already figured out, the theme of this week's Simpson's episode is stealing. The episode entitled, **Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment**, begins with a scene where **Ned Flanders**, Homer's hyper evangelical Christian neighbor, is uncharacteristically yelling at the cable installation man. Seeing his neighbor lose it, Homer heads over to see what's going on. Apparently this installer tried to offer Ned a cash deal for a free cable hookup; something Flanders would, of course, have nothing to do with! Homer, on the other hand, reacts differently. He almost gets run over by the cable man's truck trying to stop him as he's leaving! Putting all scruples and morals aside, he quickly assents to the free cable deal and has the guy do the installation on the spot. It was almost as though he did it without thinking.

As I thought about this opening scene I was reminded of the time I stole my grade 5 class mate's Greyhound bus money. I remember running back into our empty classroom to get something I'd forgotten, and there it was... sitting just inside Peter's desk... Nickels, Dimes, Quarters... there must have been 85 cents there... glittering brightly under the fluorescent lights... calling out my name... I remember that I was in a rush to get back to recess... I didn't have time to think... I had to act quickly to take advantage of this offer... it was just so tempting... what to do?... and then I took the loot. No one was there... no one would ever know! PAUSE Ever had that thought run through your mind?

I think that's what Homer must have been thinking. Once the cable was installed who would ever know? PAUSE... Only it doesn't work that way with stealing does it? Even if no one else ever knows... ever finds out... we always know. It those consciences we've all got... causing feelings of guilt... remorse... shame... "why in the world did I do that?"... they lead us to question our own integrity... wonder how trustworthy we really are? Its seems that when we steal from another we lose a part of ourselves in the process... we leave a part of ourselves behind.

In this next scene we see Homer's conscience begin to kick in. But, as you'll see, he gets it under control real quick, using a technique which you might or might not be familiar with. **(SCENE #2 – 3:30 – 4:52 [Hmmm... I don't know<< MARGE])** I call this scene the **'Justification!'** Its something we all do when we want to wash away the stain of guilt and shame that stealing leaves behind. "Cable companies are just big faceless corporations" It's not like it's an individual person we're ripping off. And besides they've got lots of money. They won't miss one measly cable subscription. Or we think... this is only a small thing ... no one cares if I take a few small office supplies from work... no one will care if I take a free C-train ride... I pay most of the time. Besides, I know a lot of people who do this and worse! Come on...everybody plays computer games at work. Everyone takes long lunches! Everyone fakes sick once in a while. Everyone uses insider information a little bit. I know lots of people who cut corners. We try to justify ourselves by depersonalizing the theft... making it common (others do)... making it relatively small... making it out to be an infrequent occurrence. But do these things really make stealing right? And do they work in terms of removing the guilt? Isn't stealing still wrong? No matter how small or big?

The Simpson family struggled with this question as they incessantly watched their 150 channels. Lisa, of course, struggled the most! She wasn't sure that her Dad was making the right choice. Deep inside she knew something was wrong... and she had that conviction confirmed that Sunday as she sat in her Sunday school class... **(SCENE #3 – 6:18 – 7:18 freeze on Lisa's face after... "Thou shalt not steal")** Now Lisa knew that her family was stealing! When they arrived home from church and sat down to watch their, "not payed for TV", Lisa imagines a hellish scene with her entire family sitting on the couch with the Devil. Temptingly he calls to her, "Come on Lisa... to won't cost you a thing... except your soul!".... PAUSE

Convinced that she needs to save her family, Lisa reminds them of their thefts at every corner. In the Supermarket she make Marge pay for the two grapes she ate before paying. (I want to confess that I ate one grape last Wednesday at Safeway just to see if it was ripe! < surely that's not stealing!) At home Lisa continues to work over Homer with questions and looks. But Homer won't cave in! He continues in his attempts to cover his guilt instead by inviting all the guys from the plant over to watch the big fight at his house!

This is another way we try to wash away our guilt. If we share what we stole then we think the guilt get parceled out as well. Trust me... this doesn't work either.

Remember the bus money I stole as a kid? You won't believe what I did to try and assuage my guilt. I went home... stewed and stewed and then came up with this great idea! I decided to throw it all over my parents front lawn and then I called all the kids in the neighborhood over, telling them that someone had thrown all kinds of money on our lawn! Well you can imagine the scene... kids everywhere combing through the grass... And I'm right in there with them! And for some strange reason I was able to remember where I dropped all the quarters!

What was I thinking? That spreading the shame out would make me feel better? That I could use my lawn to launder my guilt? Anyway... Homer calls a big party to justify his stolen booty. And Lisa... well she realizes that she needs to take the matter even further. She goes to visit **Reverend Lovejoy** to try and get some divine wisdom.

(SCENE #4 – 12:41 – 13:27 “Thank you Reverend Lovejoy”) And so the church's solution is that Lisa ought not participate in this stealing activity. And that's the whole answer... nothing more. Reverend Lovejoy's advice was to just go home and not participate. Typical church answer I think... and it is partly right... We definitely should not participate in stealing. But the solution does fall short... and it's fraught with pitfalls. I think it's really only half the answer on how we need to confront the problem of stealing. Too often, a Christian response to stealing, or any other “sin” for that matter is to merely refuse to get involved. While this head in the ground response, does protect us, it does nothing to address the reality of the problem. Merely choosing not to get involved also leaves one very susceptible to becoming judgmental toward others. And the way I read Jesus teachings and life, judgmentalism can be an even bigger problem than the original concern! I think that when churches and individuals stop at just ‘not getting involved’ they set themselves up for legalism and judgmentalism. They become hypocritical finger pointers!

I think Rev'd Lovejoy would have done Lisa better by directing her to a few words written by the Apostle Paul. In a letter he wrote to a church in Rome, Paul addressed the problem stealing this way...

“The commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not Murder, Do not steal, Do not covet, and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself. Love does not harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

Romans 13:9-10

Now get what he’s saying here. The best way to keep these laws is by loving others! The ten commandments are not best lived out through what we don’t do. Holding back... not getting involved... harnessing ourselves in.... bridling our lives! The commandments are best lived out through what we do do! Trying to hold yourself back from doing bad things is not the best way to protect yourself from sinning. The best way to do that is to pro-actively go out and do the opposite. And the opposite noted here is loving your neighbour! The ten commandments provide a negative definition for a positive admonition. Don’t do that bad stuff, love people! So Rev’d Lovejoy’s advice to Lisa shouldn’t have stopped at just not getting involved. She could have been advised to find a loving way to get more involved.

And for this area of stealing in particular, the Apostle had some more specific advice. Same kind of idea of positive replacement... He wrote...

“He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his hands, that he may have something to *share with those in need.*”

Ephesians 4:28

Had Rev’d Lovejoy given her the whole answer, maybe Lisa could have gone to her dad and said, “Hey dad... I talked to Rev’d Lovejoy today...” Homer> “Dohhh!”... “And he said that hooking up free cable is stealing! And that stealing is wrong. Not only do you get all the guilt and stuff, but you also lose out on the good feelings of an honest days work... the sense of rightness you feel when you earn what you own. When we work for the things we own then they’re truly ours! There’s something totally right about living this way. You’ll be happier this way dad!” And if Lisa wanted to be a really good little theologian, she could have also told her dad that another opposite kind of thing to do would be giving. Like the apostle wrote, we need to work for what we get and then **share** with those in need. Giving is the ultimate expression of love. While stealing is only interested in getting... love wants to give. Giving is the ultimate antidote for a thief.

Ok, enough of my using Lisa to make my theological points... back to the Simpsons story. Despite Lisa's constant reminders of his stealing sin, Homer continues with his plan to have all his buddies over to watch the big fight. The problem is that even having the party itself ends up pricking Homer's conscience! If you watch this scene, you'll see what I mean. **(SCENE #5 – 17:49 – 18:57 “Smithers the Cheetos...”)** I guess the point here is that your stealing will eventually catch up with you. No thief is perfect in what he does, and eventually we all slip up! I used to work with a guy who said that you need to have a very good memory to be a liar. You need to be able to remember all the lies you've previously made in order to know how to respond to future situations. I guess the equivalent for a thief is that you need to have a lot of rooms to hide your stuff in! And you've got to remember who you stole what stuff from!

Its funny how stealing can plague a person. In the scene prior to this one, Homer is again approached by the cable guy, only this time he offers to sell him a car stereo. Indignant, Homer sends him packing. (he obviously does have some stealing boundaries!) But the experience leaves him reeling. He installs triple locks on his doors... he puts bars on his windows... he starts to become paranoid and filled with fear. As I observed this scene I was reminded of this bit of old Hebrew wisdom I've been reading about in the Psalms. Its this idea that the sins we commit will eventually come back to bite us! As we steal and become thieves and become less trustworthy, we then project our lack of trust worthiness upon others. Because I'm a thief, I think others will be the same. I see this law at work all the time... greedy people always worried someone will rip them off... lewd husbands freaking out over other men looking at their wife... liars never able to trust what others say...

I think it's the same with stealing. The more you do it, the less able you are to enjoy it. Too many security worries! The stuff you stole ends up owning you. (I won't begin to get into my stories illustrating this point... past life... but it still haunts me sometimes!) Back to the Simpsons... And so, Homer has his party... only after all the hassle of hiding all the stolen stuff, he's lost his appetite for the fight. And he ends up joining the rest of his family on the front lawn... **(SCENE #6 – 21:04 – SNOW)**

And so, eventually, Homer does the right thing... and he disconnects his illegal cable connection. This is another fundamental lesson for the those of us who've been thieves, if we want to leave our life of stealing, we need to right our wrongs. And sometimes that may come with a cost. I had to spend a little money righting some wrongs from my past career. And believe me, as a poor seminary student at the time, it hurt. Others may have to pay in other ways... by giving time back to the company... or to the family. For some of you it may mean disconnecting some illegal cable connections or the like. Only you really know what recompense you need to make.

Now there may be some of you out there who don't see the application of this message to their life. "I don't steal... I don't rip my employer off... this topic really doesn't apply to me... nice message and all, but not really any personal applications here...." For you I want to share this personal story.

Many of you know that I took last weekend off for a break. What you didn't know is the reason why. PAUSE (No I wasn't serving a weekend sentence at the Remand Centre) I took the break because I thought I was tired and overworked. What I discovered was that this was not the case. My problem was not so much that I was doing too much. My problem, I discovered, was that I wasn't doing enough! It wasn't a problem of too much stuff as much as a problem in doing the right stuff. And the right stuff I was missing centered around be being the right kind of person before God. You see I wasn't praying much... reading my Bible much... communing with God in nature much... I was missing all those things... and as a result I saw myself slipping into some old behaviour patterns... My mouth was being fouled... My actions were less than desirable... My decisions were less prudent... My temper was shorter... etc... etc...

Saturday night I had a dream... and it so upset me I sat in the living room from 4:00 – 5:30. I won't get into the details, but the gist of it was that I was a thief... and that I was stealing from God. I came to realize that when I fail to live the life that I can before God, I fall short of being the man he wants me to be. When I made choices to do certain things with my mouth, time, whatever, I was ripping him off by not doing the good I ought to be doing! I wrote this sentence down that night... "I steal from God when I do not do the good I am able to do, and choose instead to do what I want to do." And then all of a sudden I was overwhelmed. "What am I not accomplishing for you by

stealing from you the way I am?” Stealing attention (by spending more time playing computer pinball than praying)... stealing glory (by worrying more about how messages look on me than on you) Stealing influence (by wanting to be funny more than wanting to be authoritative for your causes)... Stealing Kingdom of God results (by wanting to follow my agenda instead of yours)....

I was stunned by the thought that I am ripping God off... by not living, really living my life to the fullest for him. I'm a thief! It stuck with me for days... and convicted me to making some changes in how I live this one life of mine. It also reminded me of the love that God has extended me even as I am this thief. Wednesday morning I awoke with a song from an old play on my mind... It was from the play Les Miserable... and it reminded me of a scene that centered around a thief... a thief like me who had been caught. **[VALJEAN PRIEST STORY].**

This story gives me hope.

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