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The Issue of Integrity

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Series: God's Living Legends (Part 1)

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The Issue of Integrity

How honest are you? Are you a man or woman of integrity? Would you rather die than take something that isn't yours or bend the truth just a little? Or have you been so affected by the world's philosophy and the world's standards that you simply bend the rules just enough to be respected by your peers and still accepted by your friends? The issue at stake is the issue of integrity. We will be looking at that issue in this lesson, and in particular, at how God looks at a thief. We may well come to the conclusion that not all who steal end up in jail. Some of us end up in church clothed with self-righteousness, wrongfully comfortable that at least one commandment would find us guiltless.

We have been the guests of God at the foot of Mount Sinai where, having just witnessed the very magnitude of His glory, we saw and heard God call Moses to the top of that mountain. God planned to reveal to him His basic absolutes of life. We have come to know them as the Ten Commandments. These are God's ten basic principles of living the Christian life. God's dictation is still in progress, but He is sending us progress reports so that we will have an in-depth look at what has been going on.

First, God laid down the three cornerstones of the Christian faith. They speak of the essence, the image and the expression of God. These form the basis on which the whole counsel of God rests. The fourth commandment, *remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy*, speaks of the believer resting in Christ. It is the foundation which rests itself on the three cornerstones and forms the platform on which we build the Christian life.

On this foundation, God has erected six pillars which are the final six commandments. These pillars form the basic character qualities from which flows the character of God. The first three pillars that have been discussed in the last four lessons hold up the first floor of the building of life. They are reflections of God's character in the Christian as it relates to authority, to life and to purity.

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This lesson will begin to look at the pillars which hold up the second floor. These are the even deeper attitudes that make up the mind of Christ in the Christian. This lesson and the next one will look at the fourth and fifth of these six pillars. They have to do with the issue of integrity.

Now what is integrity? Why do we combine these two commandments under one general heading? Integrity is “that simple perfection of spirit that will not compromise with the absolutes of God”. Another way to say it is to say that integrity is “the steadfast resistance to all obstacles that would remove the character of God as man’s only standard”. If you want to boil it down to more simple language, it means that a man or woman of integrity will not compromise because “the heat is on” or because “everyone else is doing it”. The man of integrity would rather fight than switch, if switching means lowering his standards an inch from the standards of God. Do you remember when God was so proud of Job in Job 2:3 that He said to Satan, “Job still maintains his integrity even though you incited Me against him without a cause.” Then in verse 9, Job’s nagging wife asked him,

Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die.

David, meanwhile, in Psalm 26 beseeches God with these words:

Judge me, Oh LORD, for I have walked in mine integrity:
(Psalm 26:1a)

Proverbs 11:3 gives us this word of encouragement:

The integrity of the upright shall guide them: but the perverseness of transgressors shall destroy them.

So the issue of integrity is at the root of a man’s walk with God. God approaches the issue with Moses, as usual, in very simple terms with two basic absolutes. The first is *thou shalt not steal*. The second is *thou shalt not bear false witness*. These are absolutes. There is absolutely no change that has taken place in the heart of God since He and Moses talked together that day. The world has redefined stealing. The world has redefined truth until even evangelical Christians get caught up in a web of confusion when they try to practically implement these principles.

Listen carefully. Where possessions are concerned, the world’s philosophy is this: “What’s mine is mine and I’ll defend

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it. What's yours is mine if I can get it". The Word's philosophy is this: "What's yours is yours and I respect it. What's mine is yours if you need it". Do you see the difference? The world says, What's mine is mine and I will defend it and what's yours is mine if I can get it. The word says, What's yours is yours and I respect it and what's mine is yours take it if you need it. In other words, the Christian yields his rights while respecting yours. The world clings to its rights while exploiting yours. The same thing is true where truth is concerned. To the world, the truth is relative. To the Word, the truth is absolute. To the world, a lie is any falsehood which cannot be justified. To the Word, a lie is any falsehood. Do you see the difference?

So these two pillars of integrity are showing signs of decay and ruin as the world races headlong toward Armageddon. Your life and mine had better be untarnished and stand straight so that the world can tell the difference. Do you see the issue? The issue is the issue of integrity. It will set you apart in a world of compromise. It will be your integrity in the seemingly insignificant gray areas of life that will make the most difference. Where do you stand on the issue of integrity?

God's first issue of integrity involves the believer's respect for the rights of others. It is a simple, straightforward command. *Thou shalt not steal*. We will, for the purpose of simplicity, use this definition of stealing: "to take or use without consent anything that does not by virtue of ownership belong to you". This can be money, possessions, time, or reputation. To steal any of those things is an affront to God and a sin against man. Every time you do so, you raise the issue of integrity.

Let's watch God deal with stealing in Exodus 22:1. We will look at this because anytime you see God the perfect Father deal with an infraction against His character, you see a pattern of how we as fathers and mothers and teachers and friends can deal with the same sin. Exodus 22 paraphrased, goes like this:

If a man steals an ox or a sheep; then kills it or sells it, he shall pay a fine of five to one or for the sheep, four to one.

If a thief is caught in the act of breaking into your house and is killed, the one who shoots him is not guilty if it happens at night.

If it happens in the daytime, he is a murderer. If a thief is captured, then he must make full restitution. If he can't, he must be sold as a slave for his debt.

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If he is caught in the act of stealing a live ox, or donkey or sheep, he has to pay double value whatever it is.

(Exodus 22:1-4 paraphrase)

If someone gives money or goods to anyone to keep for him, and it is stolen, the thief shall pay double if he is found.

But if no thief is found, then the man to whom the valuables were entrusted shall be brought before God to determine whether or not he himself has stolen his neighbor's property.

In every case, where something is stolen or lost, and the owner believes he has found it in someone else's possession, they go before God to determine whether it is stolen or not.

If a man asks his neighbor to keep his ox or his donkey or his sheep or any other animal and it dies or is hurt or gets away and there is no eyewitness to report it, then the neighbor must take an oath that it wasn't his fault.

But if the animal or the property has been stolen, then the neighbor caring for it must repay it.

If it was attacked by some wild animal, he must bring proof of that.

If a man borrows anything from a neighbor and it is injured or killed or ruined and the owner is not there at the time, the man who borrowed it pays for it.

(Exodus 22:7-14 paraphrase)

If you come upon an enemy's ox or donkey that strayed away, take it back to its owner.

(Exodus 23:4 TLB)

I guess you can see that when it comes to dealing with stealing, God has some extremely practical forms of discipline. I am going to list them for you now in over-simplified form because you might want to consider using them in dealing with your children or maybe with dealing with yourself if you have a need to make restitution.

1- He who steals should make restitution. The laws of God stated that:

a) if he is caught in the act, he should restore what he was about to take two-fold;

b) if he steals and later gets caught, he should restore what he took as much as five-fold depending on the value;

c) if he can't make restitution, he doesn't have the money and

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he has already discarded the merchandise, he should be forced to work for the one he wronged until he has earned enough money to pay the offense up to five-fold again. It is an issue of integrity and it certainly prevents future theft.

2- Finders aren't keepers. If you find something that isn't yours, even if it belongs to your worst enemy, not to try to find the owner and return it equals stealing. That is found in Exodus 23:4. It is an issue of integrity.

3- If you borrow something and lose it or damage it, you must pay for it unless it has been taken from you uncontrollably or the owner is present to protect his interest. You assume responsibility when you assume possession. It is an issue of integrity.

If these principles were still practiced in our homes and in our schools and in our courts today, God's standard of ownership might still be intact. But today a man can steal and the burden of proof is so difficult and the law is so diluted that often the best you can hope for is to have what was stolen partially returned. If the thief returns most or all of what he has taken, he is seemingly absolved of all of his responsibility. If he returns it all, he is a hero. He then goes out and waits for a chance to do it again when he won't get caught. To the world it is wrong if you get caught. To God it is wrong, period.

The key to the problem, as always, is spiritual. The battle is a spiritual battle. We can look at John 10 to see that Satan is described as the head thief. In verses 1 and 8 of this chapter we are told that he is a thief and a robber. In verse 10 we are told that he has come to steal, to kill and to destroy. So Satan's subtle tool to undermine the integrity of God is to undermine ours. He loves to steal. *He loves it when we steal.* It is a resounding slap in the face of a holy God.

No small wonder that we read in John 18:40b "Now Barabbas was a robber." The King of Glory had His life exchanged for the life of a thief. No small wonder that we read in John 12:6 that Judas Iscariot was a thief.

The King of Glory was betrayed into enemy hands by a thief. No small wonder that we read in Matthew 27:38 that Christ was crucified between two thieves. The King of Glory yielded His life on a cross with a thief on each side. No small wonder, because the real enemy is the king of thieves. He lives to steal. He loves

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to steal possessions, and he loves to steal the seed of the Word from the heart.

John 10 tells us that if he could, he would steal our very salvation, but he can't. As we will see in our next study, he is the father of lies, too. But he is the greatest thief who has ever lived. His goal is to make you steal, even a little. His goal is to make you lie, even a little. It is an issue of integrity. It is a spiritual battle in every way.

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.
(Ephesians 6:12)

So in this lesson, let's play the game, "To Catch a Thief." We are going to line up thirteen thieves who are guilty. At least, I think they are guilty. You determine from the Word if they are, and if, perhaps, they live at your house.

First of all, we meet "Paperclip Paul". A thief is anyone who robs another or takes what is not his no matter how insignificant.

But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody...
(I Peter 4:15)

In other words it says that God's role for the Christian never includes any room for taking what isn't his. Luke 16 says:

He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.

If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, how will you commit to your trust the true [spiritual] riches? If you have not been faithful in that which is another man's who is going to give you that which is your own?

(Luke 16:10,11)

There is God's measure of honesty in a person. It is his integrity in the seemingly insignificant things of life. Oh that we would teach that to our children and to ourselves. If you use your neighbor's car and don't fill it back up with gas and consider it just a "little thing", you're a thief. Luke says that if you will steal three gallons of gas you will take more if you get the chance. If you use the boss's phone for personal calls and don't offer to reimburse him, it is a little thing, but it is stealing. Luke says that if you will steal a call to Pittsburgh, you might take more if you get the chance. It is an issue of integrity. Furthermore, Luke

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goes on to say that you must not expect to be entrusted with spiritual responsibility if you have been a thief in the details of life.

Who is a thief? Let's meet "No Deposit, No Return Natalie." A thief is a person who borrows anything and doesn't return it as quickly a promised or in at least as good condition as it was when borrowed.

Evil men borrow and "cannot pay it back"! But the good man returns what he owes with some extra besides.

(Psalm 37:21 TLB)

Possession involves responsibility. If you borrow a book, keep a record of it posted where you can see it and return the book when due with at least a note of thanks. If you borrow a lawn mower, clean it before you return it and fill it with gas. If you borrow a car, wash it even if it was dirty when you got it. What you borrow may seem incidental to you, but it may be important to its owner. If you treat it as less, then you are stealing. It is an issue of integrity.

Who is a thief? Meet "Half-hearted Harry." A thief is a person who steals his boss's time. We read this:

Urge slaves [or employees] to obey their masters and to try their best to satisfy them. They must not talk back, nor steal, but must show themselves to be entirely trustworthy. In this way they will make people want to believe in our Savior and God.

(Titus 2:9,10 TLB)

The one thing your boss is paying you for is time. It is his most precious commodity. If he is paying you for forty hours and you work for 38 or you work half-heartedly for 42, you are a thief. Who wants to know the Savior of a thief? Your idleness is an abomination to God. It is an issue of integrity.

Who is a thief? Meet "Sticky Fingered Suzie." A thief is a person who misuses funds entrusted to them. I don't need to reread Matthew 25 to you. It is the parable of the talents. Each was given the responsibility to invest or use a given amount. Their judgment was not based on the amount they were given, but rather on what they did with what they had. A housewife who misuses her husband's paycheck or treats it presumptuously is a thief. The salesman who misuses his expense account is a thief. The manager who is slothful with his department's budget is a thief. You say, "Why take it so literally?" Because it is an

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issue of integrity.

Who is a thief? Meet “Greedy Gus.” A thief is someone who withholds another’s wages even for a night. Leviticus says this to employers:

You shall not rob nor oppress anyone, and you shall pay your hired workers promptly. If something is due them, don’t even keep it overnight. (Leviticus 19:13 TLB)

Likewise, if you promise an employee a benefit or a bonus and then change the rules of the game and give him less because he earned more than you expected, you are a thief. You say, “Well, everybody does it.” Well you are not everybody. You are a Christian, and to you, it is an issue of integrity.

Who is a thief? Meet “Slow-pay Sammy.” A thief is someone who does not pay his bills when they are due. Here is where the meddling gets heavy.

Don’t withhold repayment of your debts. Don’t say, “some other time,” if you can pay now. (Proverbs 3:27,28 TLB)

The Christian ought to be a day early on his payments to avoid being a day late. It is better not to owe, but if you do, the testimony is in *how you pay*. If you owe \$50.00 to the furniture store and you are late with your payment and buy so much as a candy bar with the money you *could* have used, you are a thief. You say, “Everybody is late with their payments.” We are not everybody; we are Christians. It is an issue of integrity.

Who is a thief? Meet “Give Later Larry.” A thief is a Christian who robs God of His offerings.

Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, “Wherein shall we return?”

Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? [God answers] In tithes and offerings.

Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation.

Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove [test] me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it [so big that you cannot even contain it].

And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall

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not destroy the fruits of the ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts.
(Malachi 3:7-11)

I am not here to tell you how much to give or to whom to give it. That is between you and God. But the Word clearly says that once you know what God expects of you, He expects you to give it and He expects you to give it first. The first fruits go back into the kingdom. His promise for obedience is that He will open the windows of heaven and bless you until you can't handle it. He will rebuke Satan on your behalf. He will bless your labors abundantly. But don't promise God lightly or take this commandment lightly or misrepresent through deceit what you are giving. Acts 5 tells us that God has very clear convictions at this point. You may ask, "What difference does it make?" It makes all the difference to God, because it is an issue of integrity.

Who is a thief? Meet "Albert, the Oppressor." A thief is someone who takes advantage of those who are poor or vulnerable.

He that oppressteth the poor in order to increase his [own] riches, and he that giveth to the rich, shall surely come to want.
(Proverbs 22:16)

Income from exploiting the poor will end up in the hands of someone who pities them.
(Proverbs 28:8 TLB)

Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees,
...and to take away the right from the poor of my people,
that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless!
(Isaiah 10:1a,2b)

The man who makes his living by unjustly taking advantage of those who can least afford it is stealing. I know that everybody does it. You know the answer. We are not everybody; we are Christians. It is an issue of integrity.

Who is a thief? Meet "Donnie Deduction." A thief is someone who cheats on his taxes. Romans says this:

Obey the laws, then, for two reasons: first, to keep from being punished and second, just because you know you should.

Pay your taxes too, for the same two reasons. For government workers need to be paid so that they can keep on doing God's work, serving you.

Pay everyone what he ought to have: pay your taxes and import duties gladly, obey those over you, and give honor and respect to all those to whom it is due.

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Pay all of your debts except the debt of love for others—
never finish paying that! (Romans 13:5-8a TLB)

God never told us to pay “most” of our taxes any more than He promised to meet “most” of our needs. I know, I know, everybody does it. But say it with me: “We’re not everybody, we are Christians and it is an issue of integrity.”

Who is a thief? Meet “Big Bargain Bess.” A thief is a salesman who exaggerates or misrepresents his product, or a buyer who takes undue advantage to save a dollar. Amos says,

Listen, you merchants who rob the poor, trampling on the needy; you who long for the Sabbath to end and the religious holidays to be over, so you can get out and start cheating again—using your weighted scales and your under-sized measures;

“I won’t forget your deeds.” (Amos 8:4,5a,7b TLB)

It works in reverse, too. Look in Proverbs where it says,

“Utterly worthless!” says the buyer as he haggles over the price. But afterwards he brags about his bargain!

(Proverbs 20:14 TLB)

Fairness when you sell. Fairness when you buy. No matter what everybody else does, you need to be fair because you are different. It is an issue of integrity.

Who is a thief? Meet “Reverend Dollar Signs.” A thief is a person who uses the kingdom of God for personal gain or misuses God’s money.

“The Scriptures say my Temple is a place of prayer,” he declared, “but you have turned it into a den of thieves.”

(Matthew 21:13 TLB)

Read Acts 8:18-24. This is a dangerous sin that even today is prevalent in parts of Christendom: using the gospel to get rich at the expense of the poor. God hates it. Be careful to whom you give. You are accountable as to how they use it. How we spend God’s money as a church is vital. If we are slothful or wasteful or prideful, we are stealing. I don’t care how many others do it. We mustn’t. It is an issue of integrity.

Who is a thief? Meet “Holly Helper.” A thief is someone who is a partner to one who steals. Proverbs 29:24 and Psalm 50:18 tell us that it is an issue of integrity.

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Who is a thief? “Meet Herman Hardheart.” A thief is anyone who keeps even what is his when someone else has a greater need. That is stealing. You may say that you don’t know about that one.

“Then they also will answer Him saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked [without clothes] or sick or in prison, and not minister to You?’

Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, insasmuch you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’”
(Matthew 25:44 NKJV)

I John 3:17 says that if someone who is supposed to be a Christian has money enough to live well and sees a brother in need and won’t help him, how can God’s love be alive in him? If we boil it down to its basic facts, all we have is God’s to redistribute as He chooses. As He shows us where there is a need and we ignore it, are we not stealing what is rightfully His? Is it not an issue of integrity?

So there you have our latest episode of “To Catch A Thief”. Do you see anyone you know? Anyone you have ever seen before in the mirror? Look closely. *It is an issue of integrity.* It breaks the heart of God when we steal. Why? There are two basic reasons that it breaks His heart.

1- When you steal, you violate the commandment of love. Romans 13 tells us to pay our taxes because we are commanded to. You render tribute to whom tribute is due and so forth. It says in

Owe no man anything but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.

For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended [wrapped-up] in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: therefore, love is the fulfilling [the completion] of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

What Paul is saying is that you pay your taxes. Honor those you owe by paying them. Those you serve, honor by serving them. You do not commit adultery. You do not kill or steal or lie or do anything else to violate the absolutes of God because the six pillars of God are all summed up in the one phrase, Love your

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neighbor as yourself. Love fulfills the law. When you are tempted to compromise your integrity, say this, “Love works no ill to its neighbor.” It will in itself define the issue.

2- When you steal time or money or possessions or reputation, you steal from God. He owns the universe and all that is in it. He owns all of creation by virtue of being the Creator. He owns all of His children by virtue of re-creation. If you take anything that is theirs, you steal from Him. We don’t have the time, but Joshua 7:2-21 tells the story of the sin of Achan. The bottom line is that by stealing, he stole from God. When he took what wasn’t his, he took what belonged to God. That is the clincher. When we borrow and don’t return, we work ill against our neighbor. We violate the love of God. We also steal from God. When we buy on credit and don’t pay on time, we break the law of love but we also steal from God. When we withhold a man’s wages, we break the law of love but we also steal from God. When we go to work late and take full pay, we break the law of love, but we also steal from God. That is the issue. It is an issue of integrity. God issues this absolute—*Thou shalt not steal.*

You may say, “Okay, I am a thief. Today I realize that I have stolen from man and from God. What do I do about it?” You can do these three things:

1- Ask God to forgive you. (I John 1:9) Be specific. Make a list of each and every known violation and ask God to forgive you for each one. Then, go to every person you have offended and ask *them* to forgive you. (Matthew 5:23-25) You say, “That is hard.” Yes, but that is right. It’s an issue of integrity.

2 - You can make restitution wherever restitution is needed or possible (Exodus 22). You say, “That is even harder.” Yes, but it is vital. It’s an issue of integrity.

3 - Lastly, you can obey. (Ephesians 4:28) It simply says this: “Let him that stole, steal no more.” You say, “That means stop it!” Yes, and that’s the clincher.

Conviction is not designed by God to make you feel bad. It ought to do that, but that’s not its purpose. Conviction is designed by God to make you repent, to make you change your behavior or your attitude because He who lives in you is grieved over that behavior or attitude. The purpose of this lesson is not to make you laugh over how much you have been stealing. It is to make your heart break until you see *every single violation as*

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a personal act of stealing from God. Then, having broken your heart because you have broken God's, you take the steps *in His power* to see that you will never, ever, steal again.

I know, I know. "Everybody does it". But let's say it one more time together in closing. "We're not everybody. We're Christians. And it's an issue of integrity."

For Focus and Application

1- Read Exodus 22:1-14, and 23:4, and then paraphrase it (put it in your own words) using items and circumstances that are current in today's society.

2- Consider the three principles that spring from this absolute that are found on page 6. Take each of these situations and write out an incident in today's society where these issues would apply, or consider court cases in which the decision should be rendered using these principles.

3- What relationship do you think there is between the escalation of crime in our day and the diluting of these consequences to crime?

4- Consider the following illustrations of stealing and apply them to your own world. Ask yourself if you are a thief like:

Paperclip Paul- Do you justify taking "little things" because "everybody does it"?

No deposit, no return Natalie- Do you borrow things and not return them promptly? Do you take back your books to the library on time? Do you return things in at least the condition they were in when you borrowed them?

Half-hearted Harry- Do you steal time on the job? Do you give 45 hours of effort in the 40 hours you work? Are you a clock-watcher? Are you the first to leave or the last?

Slippery Finger Suzie- Do you misuse funds entrusted to you? Is the petty cash too petty for you to take seriously? Is your mate's money something that you cherish because they labored for it?

Greedy Gus- Are you an employer who doesn't pay on time? Who changes the rules after the game begins? Whose word is only as good as the moment?

Slow-Pay Sammy- Do you pay your bills the day before they

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are due? Or do you ride your creditors as long as you can get by with it? Do you spend money on other things when it belongs to your creditors?

Give Later Larry- Does your giving come first or last? When you commit to give, do you take it lightly and sometimes overlook it?

Albert, the Oppressor- Do you make a living by taking advantage of the disadvantaged? Would you rather lose money yourself than see someone who needs it more than you do without?

Donnie Deduction- Do you pay every cent of tax that's due with a grateful spirit for the privilege? Or do you cut corners on your tax form because "everybody does it".

Big Bargain Bess- Do you misrepresent what you sell? When you return something or get a good buy, do you consider the company you bought it from as well your own welfare?

Reverend Dollar Signs- Do you use your Christianity as a springboard to make money or take advantage of the poor?

5- Having considered your answers to these questions, use the steps on page 14 to seek forgiveness, make restitution, and *stop stealing*.

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