

## MARY'S MISTAKE

Her heart was beating so loudly that he was afraid the people in the store would be able to hear it. She was trying not to breathe hard so that no one would notice her. She had found the clothes she wanted to take for her Barbie doll, but she had to make sure no one would catch her stealing them.

This wasn't the first time that Mary had stolen things from stores. Even though she was only nine, she had already become an experienced shoplifter. It started with only little things like candy and junk jewelry when she was seven, but gradually she worked up to more expensive items. But even though she had stolen many, many times, she was as fearful of being caught now as she ever was.

She acted like she was looking at the toys in the toy department until she felt it was safe and then she put the doll clothes into her purse. With her heart still pounding, she headed toward the door that would take her out of the store. As soon as she walked through the door she felt an enormous sense of relief. With her fear gone she felt very happy that she now had more clothes for her Barbie wardrobe.

She hadn't even gotten fifteen feet away from the entrance of the store when a young woman in her twenties approached Mary and said, "Hi."

Mary's heart felt like it was going to stop beating. She thought that she must have been seen in the store and that this woman was going to arrest her. Her fears quickly vanished though when the woman started talking. This woman wanted to talk to Mary about God.

At first Mary was totally disinterested because she thought this woman was going to give her a lecture about how to be good to go to heaven. Instead, this woman explained that being good doesn't get you to heaven, which took Mary by surprise.

What the woman was saying to Mary made sense. If Jesus died for our sins then that means that He paid our way to heaven. And if He paid our way then that means that going to heaven is a gift. So Mary believed in Jesus to get her to heaven. She wasn't about to turn down anything that was free, especially when it had to do with something as important as where she was going to spend eternity.

After the woman explained this Good News, she gave Mary what she considered "bad news."

"I do want you to know," the woman said, "that even though the way we live has nothing to do with going to heaven, it has everything to do with how God deals with us here on earth and whether or not we will have rewards in heaven. There is no way one of God's children can be bad and get away with it." She then asked, "Do you know what 'sowing' and 'reaping' are?"

"No I don't," answered Mary.

The woman continued, "The word 'sow' means 'to plant' and the word 'reap' means 'to pick or harvest.' When a farmer plants his crop he is sowing and when he gathers those crops he is reaping. The Bible says, in Galatians, chapter 6,

verse 7, 'whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap,' which simply means that what you do today effects what happens to you in the future. If you do things that are pleasing to God, then you will see God reward you with things like happiness and answered prayer, but if you are bad then you can expect God to punish you."

The idea that God punishes you for being bad really didn't appeal to Mary and she was curious about what God would do to punish someone, so she asked, "How does God punish someone?"

"Well," she answered "He can make you feel really bad and also, if you are bad He can make sure that you get caught."

That was the last thing that Mary wanted to hear. She felt like she would die if her parents ever found out that she was a thief.

After they finished talking Mary headed to her best friend's house. On the way she thought over what the woman had told her. Mary was happy to know that she was going to heaven, but not so happy to hear that now because she was a child of God that God would punish her if she were bad.

But thoughts of God and his way of dealing in our lives quickly disappeared as she approached the door of her friend's house.

Her friend Betty greeted her at the door. "Hi Mary, did you get what you wanted from the store?"

"Of course, don't I always?" said Mary. Then both girls started to giggle.

Betty was too scared to shoplift and Mary knew that Betty thought she was really brave for stealing things. Mary would share the things she took with Betty and they would tell her mother that she was borrowing them from Mary.

The next week Betty asked Mary if she could pick up some make-up so they could pretend they were teenagers. While she walked to the store it crossed Mary's mind about what she had been told about God's punishing His children, but then she thought that maybe that woman just wanted to scare her into being good.

After stealing several different kinds of make-up, she hurried over to Betty's. Since she hadn't been caught she thought she had nothing to worry about. Being a child of God didn't make any difference. She and Betty had a lot of fun pretending to be teen-age girls.

After they finished playing and it was time for Mary to go home, they discussed what they should do with the make-up. Mary decided that she would keep it at her house since she had her own bedroom, unlike Betty, who had to share her bedroom with her younger sister.

Two days later when Mary got home from school her mother asked her if she would watch Michael her two-year-old brother. Mary usually didn't mind watching Michael as long as she didn't have anything special planned. Mary's mother left the house explaining that she would be back within an hour.

While Mary's mother was gone Mary decided to finish the book she was reading. She got so involved in her reading that she didn't realize that Michael was in her room emptying out the contents of her drawers onto the floor.

It wasn't until Mary's mother was home that what Michael had done was discovered.

"What is this mess in your room?" exclaimed Mary's mother.

Mary ran to her room to see what her mother was talking about. To her embarrassment not only were all her personal belongings on the floor but also all the make-up that she had stolen two days earlier. Her mother started putting things back in the drawers for her and Mary was terrified that she was going to notice the make-up.

"Looks like you didn't watch your baby brother too closely doesn't it?" said her mother in an irritated voice.

"I'm sorry, Mom, I was reading."

Her mother quickly changed the subject when she spotted the make-up. There were several items that she picked up from the rest of Mary's things. Holding them out she asked Mary, "Where did you get all this make-up?"

Mary tried not to act nervous. "Oh, that stuff," she answered, "that belongs to Betty's mom."

"If it belongs to Betty's mother then what are you doing with it?" asked her mother.

"She let me and Betty use it," answered Mary. It was hard to look her mother in the eyes.

"Mary," said her mother, "don't you lie to me."

"I'm not lying mom," protested Mary.

Her mother said nothing. She simply finished putting the rest of Mary's things back in her drawers, including the make-up. Mary felt relieved that her mother had dropped the subject.

That night while Mary was in bed she was thinking over what a close call she had. She felt bad for lying to her mother and considered going out to the living room and telling her the truth. But as she thought of the toy that she planned on stealing next she changed her mind and decided to continue stealing for at least a while.

The next day when she came home from school Betty's mother's car was in the driveway. Mary started to feel terrible because her mother and Betty's mother were not friends, so Mary knew that it must mean trouble that she was there.

When she walked in the door, she saw not only Betty's mother but also Betty. Mary could tell how upset Betty was by the look on her face. And when she looked on the table she saw not only the make-up she had taken, but also quite a few other things she had taken over the last couple of years.

"Mary," said her mother, "do you recognize these things?" She was pointing to the things on the table.

Mary said nothing. She was so embarrassed she wished she could die. After a few minutes of total silence she burst into tears and ran into her bedroom sobbing. She felt that life could never be the same again. Probably Betty's mother would forbid her from playing with Mary and who knows what Mary's parents would do to her.

After about ten minutes Mary's mother came into Mary and said, "Dear, I was hoping so much last night you would have come to me and told me that you had lied about the make-up. But when you didn't then I had to find out the truth another way. Of course you know that I called Betty's mother. She decided to

go through Betty's things to find all of the things that didn't belong to her and I went through all your things to find what didn't belong to you. When Betty's mother confronted Betty she told her how you had been stealing for the past two years.

"You and Betty won't be allowed to play together for the next two weeks and during those two weeks I've got a lot of housework for you to do. Also all the things that you have stolen are going to be given to the Salvation Army except the make-up. That I'm going to throw away."

Mary couldn't believe how bad she felt. She was so ashamed. How she wished that she had come out of her room last night and told her mother the truth. She knew if she had then she wouldn't have to go through this whole thing with Betty's mother.

After her mother left the room Mary cried herself to sleep. When she awoke it was dark and she realized that she hadn't been called to dinner. She was glad about that because she didn't want to face her father. While she lay in bed she thought over what had happened. It did seem strange to her that she had been shoplifting for two years and had never been caught, but now that she was a child of God she was caught. She wondered if it happened by chance or if God was really responsible for her being caught. She wasn't sure about that but she was sure that she would never steal again.

About three months later when Betty and Mary were out playing together they decided to go to the store and get some ice cream. Next to the ice cream store was a bicycle shop and Mary wanted to go in and look around. One of things for sale was a portable radio that attached to the handlebars of the bicycle. "Boy, I'd really like that," said Mary.

"Me too," said Betty, "but it costs fifteen dollars. It would take me fifteen weeks to save up that much."

Mary then walked outside the store and Betty followed her. "Betty," said Mary, "if I got that radio we could play it when we went out together and I could find a place to hide it at home."

"Mary," said Betty, "you told me that you weren't going to steal anymore."

"I just changed my mind," said Mary. "Come on Betty, don't you really want me to take that radio?"

"Maybe" responded Betty.

Mary went back into the store alone and within five minutes she was out with the radio safely tucked away in her purse. Both the girls hurried away from the store. After they had gotten a few blocks away Mary pulled the new radio from her purse. She said, "I'll tell you what. You go to your house to get your bike and I'll go home and get mine and we can ride to the park together and listen to the radio."

"Okay," said Betty.

Mary then put the radio back in her purse and headed toward her house to get her bicycle.

But when Mary got home she was in for a big surprise. "Mary," her mother said with emotion in her voice, "five minutes ago a young boy went into the garage and stole your bike. The woman who lives across the street saw him and I called

the police but it was too late. I'm really sorry dear. Maybe your father will be able to buy you a used one in the near future.

Mary's heart sank. Her family was not rich and she knew that her father had worked extra hours so he could buy Mary that bicycle. It had meant so much to her. Now it was gone.

She felt terrible. She knew that this couldn't have happened by chance. Here she was coming home to put a stolen radio on her bike and someone had stolen her bike. God had to be responsible.

While she was thinking about what had happened and why it had happened, she considered the fact that she had never told her best friend about how to go to heaven.

When she talked to Betty that afternoon, she explained the Gospel to her and Betty believed it. Then Mary explained to her that the reason her bike was stolen was because God was punishing her.

She said, "You know Betty, the woman who talked to me about God warned me about being bad. She explained that if you do good things, then God will reward you and if you do bad things, then God will punish you. At first I really didn't know if that was true, but now I know it's true. I don't ever want to be punished again. And I want to return this radio."

After Mary had come out of the bicycle shop she said to Betty, "Boy it sure felt funny to be putting something back in a store." They both started laughing. "You know Betty," she said, "it felt good to do something good."

After talking about God on the way home both girls decided to get together that night and start reading the Bible together.

Mary had come to realize that it was true that if you sow bad things then you will reap bad things, so she decided to start sowing good things. She soon found that it was a lot more fun to have God work good things out in your life than to have Him work against you.