

From Stealing to Sharing – *Ephesians 4:28*

Introduction – The ethical exhortations continue, now dealing with the eighth commandment. Once again, the putting off of the old man, dying in Christ, has set us free from slavery to sin including this sin of theft. When the new man is put on, a new way of living encompasses far more than “not doing” something. We move from being a selfish people to being a people who love to bless others because we are being remade in the image of the New Man, Jesus, who said, *“It is more blessed to give than to receive”* (Acts 20:35).

The Text - *Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.*

Stealing, in the Present Tense – The verse may be translated, *“let the thief steal no longer,”* or *“let the one who steals steal no longer.”* Some have commented that theft was so common in the ancient world, along with open sexual immorality, that the Ephesian Christians would need such instruction, and certainly they did. But how common are the same sins among Christians today? Sexual sin and misuse of church funds seem to lead the top reasons ministries fall into scandal. And throughout our culture, even in Christian circles, theft is rampant.

The Different Faces of Theft – Stealing is unlawfully taking something that belongs to someone else. We are guilty of stealing when we take someone else's property (Exodus 22:1-4 – and included with oxen are cars, intellectual property, pirated videos and music files, unauthorized software use, and plagiarism). We are guilty of stealing when we refuse to render our tithes to the Lord (Mal 3:8-12). Laziness at work, along with pilfering and embezzlement from an employer, is theft (Prov 18:9, Titus 2:10). There are many more faces and examples of stealing.

The Heart of a Thief – At the heart of stealing is the breaking of the second greatest commandment, refusing to love one's neighbor as oneself. At the core is selfishness, particularly a desire to get something the easy way instead of God's way. This means a host of other commandments are being broken when one breaks the eighth. Theft comes from a heart that doesn't believe God has and will give all things at the right time; in that sense, Eve “stole” the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

“But Rather” – It is not enough to stop stealing. After one has done the appropriate works of repentance and making restitution, a lifestyle has to be taken up that is foreign to the old man but cuts with the grain of the new. The kind of working, giving and sharing that is exhorted here by Paul is something which can only be done by those who are regenerate, those who are in Christ.

The Gift of Property and Property Rights – The prohibition of stealing presupposes the existence of private property, just as the prohibition of adultery presupposes marriage. This means that any form of socialism or a forced system of wealth-redistribution is actually theft. God owns it all; the State does not.

The Gift of (Hard) Work – Paul says, *“...let him labor”* and uses a word that literally means, *“to grow weary, tired, and exhausted.”* It means to work really hard. We argue about what it means to keep the Sabbath; there ought to be more discussion about what it means to work for six days. Elsewhere, Paul warns that if a man won't work, we shouldn't feed him (2 Thess 3:10-11) and that if someone refuses to provide for his own family, he is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim 5:8).

Work is not degrading; it is a gift from God even from the time in the Garden. The protestant reformation and revival recovered a high view of the dignity of all forms of vocational work. Remember from Eph 2:8-10 that we are not saved by our good works, but we are saved to good works.

The Gift of Using Your Hands – Connected to *“...working with his hands...”* is using the gifts, skills, training, and opportunities which God has peculiarly provided for you. Connected to that is our corporate calling to build a culture, to work together but with our individual gifts in order to fulfill the cultural mandate. Individually and corporately, we are given the satisfaction from God that “we did this,” and *“well done, good and faithful servant”* (Matt 25:21).

The Gift of Giving and Sharing – In Christ, we do not share with others in order to receive God's favor, although we do receive God's favor. We are promised that our sharing will be rewarded (Luke 6:38); we cannot out-give God. This is because giving and sharing is the very nature of the Triune God (John 3:16). *“The giving of our gain rather than taking for our gain so reflects the nature of Christ that we are actually sharing Christ”* (Matt 25:31-46)... *For the fact of the matter is that if I am not Christ to my neighbor, Christ has little reality to me either. Thus, selfless sharing is grace to my own soul in that it makes Christ more real and understandable to my own heart”* – B. Chappell. That is why I said earlier that this kind of giving can only be done by those who are in Christ. This kind of giving is the giving of Christ and simultaneously the experience of Christ's grace ourselves.

This kind of giving is also never a waste. This kind of giver throws away his money the way a farmer throws seed (2 Cor 9:6-11).