

Deuteronomy 23:15-24:22
Psalm 15
Ephesians 4:17-5:21

“You Shall Not Steal”

October 10, 2021

We need to see that like the other commandments,
stealing is a broader principle than just outright theft.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 15 –
which speaks of the blessed man
who “swears to his own hurt and does not change.”
This is talking about a businessman.
He is someone who fulfills his obligations – he performs his contract –
even if he loses money on the deal.

Psalm 15 describes such a man as the one who dwell in God’s tent.

Sing Psalm 15
Read Ephesians 4:17-5:21

“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands,
so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.”

That pretty much sums up the eighth commandment.

Q73: Which is the Eighth Commandment?

A: The Eighth Commandment is, You shall not steal.

And when one thing is forbidden, its opposite is commanded.

What is the opposite of stealing?

Paul says that there are two parts:

labor–working honestly–
and giving to those in need.

Our catechism puts it this way:

Q. 141. *What are the duties required in the eighth commandment?*

A. The duties required in the eighth commandment are, truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to every one his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the right owners thereof; giving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others; moderation of our judgments, wills, and affections concerning worldly goods; a provident care and study to get, keep, use, and dispose these things which are necessary and convenient for the sustentation of our nature, and suitable to our condition; a lawful calling, and diligence in it; frugality; avoiding unnecessary lawsuits, and

suretyship, or other like engagements; and an endeavor, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own.

Q. 142. *What are the sins forbidden in the eighth commandment?*

A. The sins forbidden in the eighth commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are, theft, robbery, man-stealing, and receiving anything that is stolen; fraudulent dealing, false weights and measures, removing landmarks, injustice and unfaithfulness in contracts between man and man, or in matters of trust; oppression, extortion, usury, bribery, vexatious lawsuits, unjust enclosures and depredation; engrossing commodities to enhance the price; unlawful callings, and all other unjust or sinful ways of taking or withholding from our neighbor what belongs to him, or of enriching ourselves; covetousness; inordinate prizing and affecting worldly goods; distrustful and distracting cares and studies in getting, keeping, and using them; envying at the prosperity of others; as likewise idleness, prodigality, wasteful gaming; and all other ways whereby we do unduly prejudice our own outward estate, and defrauding ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God hath given us.

The catechism understands Paul's application of the eighth commandment.

It is interesting to note how Paul walks through the commandments in Ephesians 4:

verse 25 – “let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor”

verse 26 – “be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger”

verse 28 – “let the thief no longer steal...”

verse 29 – “let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths”

[focusing on sixth, eighth and ninth commandments]

then chapter 5:1-14 rejects sexual immorality and covetousness
(the seventh and tenth commandments).

The rest of chapters 5 and 6 then apply this to various situations in life –
very much like Moses does in Deuteronomy.

So let's go back to Deuteronomy 23 for a few minutes.

I have suggested that Moses is expounding the ten commandments in Deuteronomy 6-26.

His exposition of commandments 6-9 appears to be somewhat mixed.

It's not as though there is a neat exposition of the sixth,
and then the seventh, *and then* the eighth.

Rather, there is a general flow of emphasis, with some mixture of the exposition,
which has the effect of reminding us that many sins
may well involve violations of multiple commandments.

For instance, Deuteronomy 24:6 says that taking an upper millstone in pledge
is not just theft, but also murder!

After all, if you take away a man's ability to turn grain into bread,
you are depriving him of life.

**1. The Equity of the Law: How Should *We* Think of Theft Today? (Dt. 23-24)
a. Caring for Refugees (23:15-16)**

In chapters 23 and 24, Moses outlines several forms of theft:

23:15-16 speaks of the runaway slave.

The implication is that this slave has come from outside Israel.

Slavery was very carefully regulated in Israel,
and the assumption is that Israelite slaves would be so well treated
that only foreign slaves would be runaways.

But the principle is clear:

You were once slaves in Egypt—don't forget how God helped you escape.

You must give refuge to those who are mistreated.

Israel is to be a safe haven for those who are oppressed.

We do not have runaway slaves showing up in Michiana very often.

But there are many who are mistreated in our community.

Are you ready to give them refuge?

I was very encouraged when one of you reached out to me recently
to ask about potential refugees from Afghanistan.

We ought to be a people who are always ready and willing to give refuge
to those who are fleeing from oppression and trouble.

If *not*, then we have failed to keep the eighth commandment.

If we do not protect the refugee, then we have participated in the sins of others.

If we turn a blind eye to those who are economically oppressed,
then we participate in the oppression.

Sometimes we think, "I'm just one person – what can I do?"

Pay attention to your economic activity!

Where does your food come from?

Where do your clothes come from?

Until recently, through all of human history you would have known the answers.

My shoes were made by Bob, who got the leather from Hank –
or maybe the leather came from Sally's cow...

Nowadays you probably can't figure out *exactly* which cow...

But you can be aware – and pay attention to what you buy –

because when you buy something, you are tacitly supporting and endorsing
how it got from wherever it started to wherever you are!

Obviously you can't know everything about everything –

but take responsibility for what you *can know* –
and communicate that to others.

Hopefully they will do the same!

b. Not Charging Interest (23:19-20)

23:19-20 forbids charging interest to your brother.

You may charge interest to a foreigner, but not to a fellow Israelite.

You should not seek to make money at the expense of your brother.

This has led to all sorts of *interesting* debates in the history of the church.

This is why Jews became the chief bankers of Europe.

Rome decided that Christians could not charge interest to other Christians,
so money-lending was only possible across religious lines.

At the time of the Reformation,

this became a heated debate.

The early modern economy was beginning to move in mercantile directions.

Investing was becoming a way of making money for a broader range of people.

The Reformers were divided over the question of interest (or usury).

Some defined usury as any charging of interest

but others insisted that usury was only exorbitant interest.

Calvin argued that there were three sorts of people:

to the very poor you should give—and don't even expect to get the money back;

to those in temporary need, loan them money, but without interest;

to those who are using the money as a business deal,

you may charge interest

(the standard rate was 6%—anything more was considered usury).

If you consider the first two categories of people:

those who are very poor, and those in temporary difficulties,

it would be theft to make a profit on their misfortune.

And this is why we should give to the very poor,

and loan without interest to those in temporary difficulties.

To take advantage of the poor is theft.

But business loans are of a different sort.

The borrower is seeking to make money,

or derive some similar benefit from the loan.

The simple point is that you are not to step on your brother

as a means to your economic improvement.

Israel is warned that God will not bless them if they charge interest of each other.

If you seek to make money at the expense of your brother,

God will not be pleased!

Within our own churches today there are two examples of how this can work:

the PCA has an interest-free loan fund (the Five Million Fund)

that loans money at no interest to mission works building their first buildings.

This is based on the principle of not charging interest to your poor brother.
But the Five Million Fund is *only* available to the “poor brother.”
Established churches must obtain loans from a bank.

The OPC has a loan fund that is available to all OP churches.
They charge a lower interest rate than commercial banks
but they charge interest on the principle
that the churches that benefit from the fund ought to contribute
(as they grow) to those less fortunate than themselves.

Both are attempting to embody the principles that Moses articulates.

c. How You Think about “Your” Income (23:24-25; 24:19-21)

23:24-25 speaks of how to behave when you are in your neighbor’s field.

You may snack on your neighbor’s produce without asking.
But you may not harvest it as your own.

Now, children, *always* ask your parents before doing this!

We live in a culture that generally does not accept this principle,
so make sure you talk to your parents before snacking in your neighbor’s garden!

But the point of this law is that the land isn’t yours.

You may snack from your neighbor’s vineyard because the Land belongs to God.

You may NOT take any home, however,
because God has given that harvest to your neighbor.

And likewise, the implication is that you may not fuss
about other people snacking from your crops.

The blessings of God are to be shared with others.

You may not selfishly and greedily keep them to yourself.

In our day, when so many of our neighbors think that their land belongs to them,
we should be polite and ask before we snack from their garden.

Now, *after the harvest*, you are supposed to leave some for the poor (24:19-21).

This is the principle of gleaning.

You are not supposed to go through your fields, orchards, or vineyards twice.

You should leave something behind for the poor,
so that they can 1) get food, and 2) work for their food.

Indeed, it would be *unjust* for you to keep your whole harvest.

You must NOT glean your whole field;
you must NOT gather all your olives or grapes.

You MUST leave some of your produce in your field for the poor.

You may not consider your whole income to be *yours*.

Moses would not have much sympathy
for a libertarian economic system,
where you are free to do whatever you like with *your* property.
“You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt;
Therefore I command you to do this.”
Caring for the poor is NOT optional.
Neither is it left to the individual to decide how it should be done.

Now, in our day, we no longer live in an agrarian society.

Moses’ law worked in a time where widows and orphans could glean the fields,
but an urban, post-industrial society we must care for the poor in a different way.

But think about the principles here:

- 1) there will always be those who need assistance
- 2) everyone who has substantial wealth (in those days it was land)
must contribute a portion of their harvest/income for those in need.
- 3) those who are able to work should work to get it (in those days, by gleaning).
(Although remember that Naomi did not glean—only Ruth,
so we need to make sure to care for the elderly/disabled)

All of this should show us that the equity of the Mosaic law
says that we honor the poor in the land

by giving a portion of our income for their benefit.

We ought to encourage a form of welfare that discourages laziness,
but the principle of welfare is thoroughly biblical.

2. Theft and Greed: The Heart of the Problem (Ephesians 4-5)

In Ephesians, Paul takes these same principles and applies them to the church.

“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor,
doing honest work with his own hands,
so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” (4:28)

Paul calls the church to walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us (5:2).

Our imitation of Christ (5:1) is rooted in our participation in Christ (4:15).

Paul has said in chapter 2 that “it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith,
and this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God,
not a result of works, so that no one can boast” (2:8-9)

But because you have been saved by grace,
you “are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works,
which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” (2:10)

There is no way that you can earn salvation.

The only way to be saved is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ God has broken down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile,
and has made both partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel 3:6

And so now Paul speaks to the Gentiles and says,
“You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.
They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God
because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.
They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality,
greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” (4:17-19)

Here is where we see the root of theft.

Greed.

Selfishness.

Longing for the “good life.”

In 5:5 Paul says that “you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral
or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater),
has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.”

Greed—covetousness—is nothing more or less than idolatry.

That should not surprise us.

We saw two weeks ago that murder is rooted in hatred,
and that hatred of man is also an attempt to lash out at God,
because man is the image of God.

And we saw last week that adultery is rooted in lust,
which itself is a form of idolatry—

turning one’s focus to the creature rather than the creator.

So also theft is rooted in greed—

another “inordinate desire.”

It is right and proper to eat and wear clothing.

But when our passion for consumption consumes us,
that’s where we get in trouble.

After all, children why do you grab a toy from your brother?

You want what he has!

You might say – “But it’s my toy!”

It’s still not okay to “grab”!

It’s not okay to be selfish – even with our own things!

The problem is that we are consumed by our own selfish desires!

Our desires are eating us up!

Isn’t that why you cheat on your taxes?

Isn’t that why you steal from your employer?

Oh, you may rationalize it:

“the government is just stealing from me!”

“I work hard, I deserve more than I’m paid!”

“My little brother has played with that toy long enough....”

You may be older, but you're no different.

But we also need to consider sins of omission.

Sins of commission are the easy ones to spot.

You committed a sin.

Sins of omission are harder.

You omitted – you left something out of what God requires.

Think about what Paul has said:

If we are called to work with our hands,

so that we may have something to share with those in need,

then if we devote our attention exclusively to our own wants,

we are no better than thieves.

You may be a hard-working laborer.

You may be scrupulously honest in the workplace.

You have devoted yourself to be aboveboard in all your economic dealings.

But if you devote your entire economic efforts to the furtherance of your own career,
your own family,

your own estate,

then according to the Apostle Paul, you are a thief,

because you did not share with those in need.

It's also worth pointing out that Paul does not focus on giving back to those who were wronged,
but rather on the heart and walk of the offender.

The thief is one who is preoccupied with “getting” stuff –

and particularly, getting stuff that does not rightly belong to him.

True repentance – a true change of heart and of mind –

will result in the sort of person who loves to work,

not so that he might get stuff,

but so that he might give stuff.

We need to be careful about this one!

In our culture, we look at the poor

and we urge them to work hard, so that they can become like us!

Why?

Has all this “stuff” made us happy?

When Paul says that the penitent thief

should be focused on sharing with those in need,

he is not excluding us from that call.

What is your attitude toward “stuff”?

One wise reformed pastor suggested that each family
divide “stuff” into three categories:
necessities, conveniences, and luxuries.

After you have covered the necessities of life
(food, clothing, and housing),
for every dollar you spend on conveniences,
you should give a dollar to the poor.

What about luxuries, you might ask?

Oh, he would say, there is no place in the Christian life for those!
If we have food and clothing we will be content with these.

Luxuries, by definition, are an indulgence of the flesh.
Definitions of the word point out that luxury
is all about excess and indulgence.

We live in an age when conveniences have become necessities
(could anyone really live without a television or a microwave?)
and luxuries have become conveniences.

How many of us actually *think* that we work hard so that we might have enough to share?

No, we think that we work hard so that we can provide for our families.

Provide what?

Necessities?

Conveniences?

Maybe you and I need to rethink the way we approach our finances –
indeed our whole attitude towards life!

In the Old Testament, God forbade farmers to glean their own fields.

When you harvested your field, you had one and only one pass.

The gleanings were to be left for the poor and needy.

(It had the effect of providing for the poor,

while still requiring the poor to work for it–

you weren't told to harvest it, and then give it to the poor as a hand-out
but to leave it in the fields for them to come and get).

Our deacons over the years have done various things to help people in need
that are not just “handouts,”

but follow this “gleaning” principle.
Of course, that can take some work.
We have to find work for them to do!
(But if you have projects that need doing,
the deacons may be able to find someone who can do them)

Paul is applying this principle of mercy to us.
We, too, are to share with those in need.
First in our own families:

1 Timothy 5:8. *But if any provide not for his own,
and specially for those of his own house, he has denied the faith,
and is worse than an unbeliever.*

But also in the church, and in our community.
And when those far away from us are in special need,
we should help them (the collection for Jerusalem in Acts and 1 Cor).

This is why we take up a diaconal offering on the first Sunday of every month.
Most of it we use in helping the needy in our own congregation
but we have sent monies to churches and organizations around the world
to help our fellow Christians show mercy to those around them.

But what does the diaconal offering teach us?

After all, what we do together on Sunday morning
should become the pattern for the whole week.
Just as we confess our sins together,
we should confess our sins as families and individually.
Just as we hear the Word together,
we should read the word as families and individually.
Just as we rejoice at the Lord’s Table together,
we should break bread with thanksgiving and joy as families and individually.
The Christ with whom we meet on this day
is the same Christ who dwells in our hearts every day!

What does the diaconal offering teach us?

We need to give to those in need.
Now, those gifts do not always need to be money!
Bringing a loaf of bread to your neighbor,
helping build a fence, or helping with a moving party–
babysitting someone’s children,
or driving them to a doctor’s appointment–
all of these things are ways of giving to those in need.

And they are economic ways of giving.
Bread has economic value!
Daycare is a valuable service.

Gasoline costs money!
And then, yes, sometimes you should actually give cash!
As Prov. 28:27 says, “Whoever gives to the poor will not want,
but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse.”

Many years ago I realized that all of my “charitable giving”
was oriented around giving to particular organizations.
So I created a new category in my budget – and started setting aside a regular amount
(a “gleanings” you might say!) to be able to give – or lend – to those in need.

Are you seeking to “have something to share with anyone in need?”

3. Theft and the Cross: the Heart of the Solution

Because at the heart of Paul’s call to generosity is no one else but Jesus Christ.

Jesus—who was stripped of his raiment, and left with nothing,
as he hung there naked on the cross—

And yet, “when he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.” (4:8)

What did he have to give?

—this man who had nothing?

—this man who was crucified between two thieves?

Paul speaks of this in Philippians—

when he urges each one of us to “look not only to his own interests,
but also to the interests of others.” (2:4)

Why?

“Have this mind among yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.”

He was God—and yet was not grasping and greedy for what was *rightfully* his!

“But he made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant,
being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (2:5-8)

Through his humiliation,

as he endured the scorn of his suffering and shame,

he was not greedy—he was not grasping—

because he saw the joy set before him!

“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him

the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”

Why are you greedy?
Why are you a thief?

Because you do not see what God has promised you in Jesus Christ.
You are not believing his promises!
All that is Christ's is yours!
But that's not good enough for you.
You want all that stuff!

Are you worried about providing for your family?
Making sure that you have everything you need?
Jesus has a few words for you:
“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.” (Mt 6:33)

Repent of your greed.
Repent of your theft.
And flee to Christ.
Turn from your idolatry of things to the living and true God.
And he will provide for all of your needs.

Love God.
Love neighbor.
There is a reason why Jesus says that on these two commandments
depend all the law and the prophets!
When you see who you are in Christ—
that you have been delivered from the power of sin and death,
and have been given the inheritance of the children of God—
how can you not love God?
how can you not devote yourself to his service?

The heart of theft is greed,
which is nothing else but another form of idolatry.
And the only solution for theft is found in the cross of Christ—
where Jesus gave himself freely as a sacrifice to wash away our sins.

Let us pray.