

Sermon – 09/11/2008 am

New Man, Stop Stealing

Study Text: Ephesians 4:28

The other day I read that car thefts and home invasions were down to just 70,000 in 2007. That is good news – except if you were a victim of such crime. But the report went on to say that the rate of credit card fraud has risen dramatically with some 800,000 people being the victim of fraud in 2007, with a total loss of almost \$1 billion (*Choice*, November 2008).

Theft is big business. Theft is widespread, even if you do not actually know anyone who is a thief. But then again you probably do. Last Tuesday millions of Australians were busy trying to steal money, and many were successful. They took money from another person without working or providing a service. Gambling is stealing.

Stop Stealing

You shall not steal is the eight commandment and like *you shall not tell lies* and *you shall not murder*, appears to be a straightforward command of God. Writing to the church at Ephesus Paul tells believers to put away lying and to stop stealing. Before they believed many were habitual ‘stealers’, like their counterparts at Corinth (I Corinthians 6:10). They thought nothing of taking what did not belong to them. If they got caught they would be punished, but if they got away with it they thought they were clever. Their conscience was not yet enlightened by the Spirit of God.

In India theft is a way of life for millions. We were amazed to find even fridges had locks to stop house servants stealing the butter. Travelling on trains you must chain your bag to the seat. The gods they worship are sometimes portrayed as clever thieves. Still, no one likes being the victim of theft, so those who get caught are severely humiliated or beaten – or sometimes killed.

We all know what stealing is – or do we? Stealing means taking something that is not rightfully yours. It is taking something for which you have not worked or provided a service, or which is not freely given to you. Even if you have something that rightfully belongs to another, to keep it is stealing – like tithes and taxes. Stealing does not just involve money but any property and even ideas. Students are aware of plagiarism, the stealing of ideas.

Why do people steal? It is because they are poor and needy? A man in the book of Proverbs prayed *give me neither poverty nor riches...lest I be full and deny you...or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God* (Proverbs 30:8, 9). Poverty may tempt people to steal but they can resist temptation. No one is forced to steal. Poverty is no excuse for stealing.

This man Agur feared God. He would not steal and *profane the name of my God* (Proverbs 30:9). The new man in Christ is a man who fears God. He does not think he is clever if he steals and gets away with it because he knows God is sees all things and God knows of his dishonesty. Stealing, like all sin, is against God. ‘I have sinned against heaven and before you’ said the prodigal son.

The new man in Christ knows that God is his creator. He knows the power of God to supply all his needs. When in need he will pray to God who promises to supply all our needs. The new man also understands that all he has comes from God, and that nothing he has ultimately belongs to him. We are but stewards of what the Lord has given us. This understanding lay behind the outbreak of wonderful sharing with the early church (Acts 4).

It is not only the poor who steal of course. Few if any of the 70,000 burglars and car thieves would have been stealing because they were hungry. Even fewer of the thousands who cheated on credit cards, stole from their employer, or from the tax department did so because of hunger.

It is selfishness or covetousness which motivates most thieves. People want more and more of the things of this world. They think that riches will make them happy in some way. They lust after the things of this world and are never satisfied with what they have. Thieves think only of themselves and pay no regard to other people, or to God. But God tells us to think about other people, to love your neighbour as yourself. You do not like being the victim of theft so do not steal from others.

This command, and a fear of God, must dictate our moral behaviour with regard to stealing. Whilst stealing a car or shoplifting (which again is widespread in our society) is unmistakably theft, some things are not necessarily seen as theft in our society. If you get the wrong change at the checkout is that your 'good luck' or should you return any overpayment. If you find a lost purse or a \$50 note on the path is your 'good luck' or do you try to return it? Remember the command – do to others as you would have them do to you.

Many consider stealing from the government to be in a different category. But is this the case for those who belong to Christ? Stealing on tax or on welfare is no different from other stealing. It is taking what is not rightly yours, no matter what excuse you may put forward. Stop stealing and be content with what you have. If you need something ask God, but do not *ask amiss that you may spend it on your pleasures* (James 4:3).

Work for Your Bread

As with the other moral imperatives which Paul directs to the new man in Christ he does not stop at the negative, at the 'do not steal'. There is a 'but'; there is a positive side to this command. Just as the person lying was to speak truth with his neighbour, so the one stealing is now to *work with his hands what is good* (4:28). He is to do an honest days work.

In the first place we are to work in order to have food to eat. *If a man will not work, neither shall he eat* (II Thessalonians 3:8). In the basic paradigm you must plough your field and sow a crop in order to have food. You are not to go stealing your neighbour's crop – even if you consider that work. Work is honourable.

Working *with your hands at what is good* is honourable even if some work is not necessarily 'physical'. Let us not despise physical labour or hard work. The word translated 'labour' in this verse means to 'toil', to 'work up a sweat'. Paul tells us to be honest workers, to be hard workers, not just working when the boss is watching (6:6). We are to work at what is good or useful – or we might say productive. The productivity of some work is questionable. The gambling industry and the alcohol industry are hardly productive. Their main outcome is destruction.

In India widows consider begging to be their right. Women carrying babies spend their time begging for money. One day we offered such a lady honest work cleaning our house but she refused. In our society some consider it their right to get welfare and refuse to work even when they are able. What does this verse say to such people?

One of the outcomes of the Reformation was a transformation in people's attitude towards work. Work is honourable before God. The Puritans were hard workers, as were the Quakers. Some became rich, and most that got rich were very generous to the needy. Those who work hard and do not squander their money on drink or gambling will have sufficient. 'Every revival of true religion' writes Martin Lloyd-Jones 'exalts the dignity of work because it brings man to see that God has given him his body and all his faculties and he is meant to use them'. He is meant to labour at productive work -without stealing time from his family or his God of course.

Work to Give

Paul goes even further with this teaching. From stealing he goes to work, to hard work, and then to working in order to have something to give to the needy. He goes full circle. Remember what we said about the poor being tempted to steal. Well, here is the answer. In the church at least the needy are to be helped by those who are able to work. They have prayed of course but this is how God will supply their needs – through his own people.

Love your neighbour as yourself. This command applies to all people, but first and foremost to those of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10). Paul has the church in mind as he gives this teaching. The church is in the background of the whole chapter and even this whole letter. Paul saw how the first Christians responded to the gospel – he was there. He knew about the selling of possessions and the sharing with the needy. Those Christians did not cling to what they had saying 'I worked hard for this and I am keeping it' – except for Ananias and Sapphira. They worked hard for what they had but gave thanks to God and gladly shared with others in the fellowship.

The apostle Paul practiced this teaching himself. He was always ready to work with his hands in order not to be a burden to others, and even to have something to share with others (Acts 20:34). He believed the words of Jesus – it is more blessed to give than to receive. Do you know the joy of such blessing?

As a new person in Christ, as a person who fears God and obeys his command to love your neighbour as yourself, have you stopped stealing? Do you have, or if you are able, do you seek honest work in order to provide bread for yourself and your family? And furthermore, do you as a new person in Christ regard all you have as from God and seek to help those in need, firstly in the church, and then the general community?

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