

“What's Mine Is God's”

Exodus 22:1-15

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There are three main attitudes towards wealth and possessions for today. The first is diabolical: “what's yours is mine, I'll take it.” The second attitude is American: “What's mine is mine, I'll keep it.” The third attitude is biblical: “What's mine is God's, I'll share it.” It is not all that difficult to know which attitude our text is urging us to take. Not only are we to avoid stealing our neighbor's possessions, but we are to share what we have with our neighbors. This is especially clear once we have uncovered the truth about God's justice with regard to our possessions.

If we borrow something, we are to give it back. This is true whether we have borrowed money, tools, books, toys, or time. The biblical principle here is that we are to be very careful indeed of our neighbor's possessions when we borrow them. Verses 7-8 tell of an example where a borrowed possession is stolen by a third party. If the thief can be found, then the restitution is easy. However, if the thief cannot be found, then the matter needs to be left up to God. The NKJV translates the word as “judges” in verse 8. The word is sometimes translated that way. However, it is the word normally used for “God” elsewhere in the Bible. It seems more likely that since human ingenuity cannot always figure out what happened, that some things will have to be left up to God to make right.

There can sometimes be a fine line between accidents and negligence. Verses 10-15 tell us what is supposed to happen under those circumstances. It makes a difference whether the animal is borrowed or whether it is given into a neighbor's safe-keeping. If the person keeping it safe has done what he can reasonably be expected to do to keep the animal safe, and the animal still dies, then the person keeping the animal is not liable for the damages, though he may have to present the carcass of the animal to prove that wild beasts did it.

Verses 14-15 make a distinction between a borrowed thing while the owner is present versus a borrowed thing while the owner is not present. Restitution is necessary if someone borrows an animal (and by extension any other thing) and the animal dies with the owner being absent. However, if the owner is present, then the assumption is that the health of the animal is then the owner's responsibility. The hiring fee mentioned in verse 15 operates as a kind of insurance, if you will. The hiring fee is what covers the restitution.

So much for borrowing. But suppose a person wants to steal something from someone else? What then? The case is entirely different. In the case of borrowing, full restitution is all that is required. What you borrow, you pay back. However, the thief wants to profit by someone else's loss. There is a criminal intent there that must be punished, in addition to the mere restoration that must happen anyway. This is why, in normal cases, the thief has to pay back double. Just paying back what he stole would not be just. You have to pay back what you borrowed even if there was no intent to steal anything. But if the intent is to steal, then the thief is intending to get rich by someone else's loss. Therefore what he wanted to do to his neighbor must be done to him. He must be made to feel that very loss that he was intending to inflict (or actually did inflict!) on his neighbor. His neighbor must become richer by the very amount the thief intended to steal. In many ways, it is an attempt to go beyond mere justice to help the thief understand and sympathize with the person he was trying to victimize.

If this is so, then how do we explain the fourfold and fivefold restitution in verse 1? Well, notice firstly the different circumstances. In verse 1, the thief has either killed or sold the stolen animal. In verse 4, however, the animal is found alive in the hands of the thief. So the

difference between the two situations is that the thief has disposed of the animal in verse 1, whereas he has not in verse 4. If the thief disposes of the animal, then he is, in effect, trying to prevent the double restitution from happening. As a result of that additional sin, he owes a redoubled amount to the original owner. Furthermore, especially if we are talking about sheep or oxen, there is an additional element here of the sacrificial system. It is quite possible that we are talking about animals that could be sacrificed. If a thief were to steal the animal that would have been sacrificed, then the thief is stealing more than sheep, but also forgiveness. These would explain the fourfold restitution of verse in the case of a sheep. The ox is a far more valuable animal than the sheep, and is the equivalent of the tractor today. Without an ox to help with the farming, the farmer would face almost certain destitution. He would be missing out on the work that the ox could be doing, and might even miss out altogether on an entire phase of the farming process. Therefore, the farmer (especially the poorer ones!) would face sometimes extreme financial hardship if his ox was stolen from him. Hence, in the case of an ox stolen and then either sold or killed, the thief owes one more ox for a total of five. If a society would really wish to have something act as a deterrent, this would surely be a good idea! Our current situation is surely not very just. Oftentimes, the victim doesn't get anything back, and the thief, if they pay anything, pays it to the court. Then the thief is imprisoned on the taxpayer's dollar. How is this just to the victim? These days, the victim is lucky to get back what was stolen. And there is no attempt to get the thief to understand the victim's point of view. If all thievery was punished by a double repayment, surely

Motive is important. In verses 5-6, we see instances in which loss occurs, but which are not necessarily motivated by a desire to profit by the neighbor's loss. Verse 5 describes an all too common situation that arises when those who take care of animals come into contact with those who want to farm the land. The animals will often either trample or eat much of the grain that is being grown. This incident is assumed to have happened by accident. Only single restitution is thus required. A person is responsible for their own actions, and for the actions of the animals that are within their care. A person who starts a fire needs to tend it in such a way that it does not catch some of the brush on fire. This word for "brush" or "thorns" indicates dry weeds that are easily combustible. A person is responsible for one's own actions. We live in a culture where the last thing people seem to want to do is to take responsibility for their own actions. Anyone and anything except oneself is blamed for the behavior. But this is not what the Scripture teaches. We are responsible for our actions. In the case of verse 6, a person is responsible for knowing how easily a fire can spread, and taking steps to ensure that it does not happen.

Up until now we have been considering merely the possibility of theft. Theft, however, can lead to other, much more serious crimes. This is the focus of verses 2 and 3. There are two situations in view, one happening at night-time, the other during the day. What is going on here is that a thief will assume that a house is occupied at night, whereas the owner might be out at work during the day. Furthermore, the victim would not be able to see who the intruder was, or to take stock of how dangerous the would-be thief was, if this all happened at night. That is why it is prudent in such cases, if you know it is an intruder, to use all necessary force to stop the thief, up to and including killing the thief to prevent him from murdering yourself or people in your family. In the day-time, however, you can see if the person means you harm, or is just merely trying to steal something. From this passage we learn, then, that even a thief's life is a precious thing. Normal punishment for theft did not ever include capital punishment, except in the case of kidnapping, which we looked at in our treatment of the eighth

commandment. Most laws from this time period prescribed death as the punishment for theft, especially if the victim was someone important. The Bible, however, never puts possessions on the same level with a person's life.

This passage is the background for helping us to understand some very important things about salvation and also a particular incident in the New Testament. We will start with the incident in the New Testament. The incident is that of Zacchaeus, told in Luke 19:1-10:

Then *Jesus* entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, *there was* a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. But when they saw *it*, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner." Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Zacchaeus was regarding himself as the worst of thieves, in that he was volunteering to give back fourfold what he had taken from people. He was, of course, as one writer puts it, the "kingpin of the Jericho tax cartel." We would call him today the chief executive officer of the IRS. He was regarding himself as a sheep-stealer, and one who had put restitution beyond all reach. Restitution was beyond his reach, but it was not beyond the reach of King Jesus. When Jesus brought regeneration to this man, the fruit of it was very obvious, wasn't it? Instead of seeing other people's money as his, he started to see everything he "owned" as actually belonging to God. What is his is actually God's. Only through Jesus could such a debt ever be repaid.

The One person from whom we have stolen the most is God. This is a debt that we cannot even pay back once, let alone twice, as is required by the law. To give you some indication of this, it is necessary to do a little math. In the parable of the unforgiving servant, we learn that he owed his master 10,000 talents. A talent is about 70 pounds. So, if we multiply 10,000 talents by 70, we get 700,000 pounds. Multiply that by 16 ounces to the pound, and we get 11,200,000 ounces. At today's price of gold, which is about \$1400 dollars per ounce, we arrive at \$15,680,000,000. The average worker in that day could earn perhaps 100 dollars per day. At that rate, it would take him about 430,000 years to pay off the debt. You can see from this how pitiful it is for the servant to say "Have patience and I will pay it all back." It is a completely unpayable debt, and that is the entire point! Only a person who has infinite riches at his disposal can pay that debt. Listen to this beautiful gospel promise, from the book of Isaiah: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your god. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received *from the Lord's hand* double for all her sins." We are the ones who have stolen from God, and yet Jesus is the one who paid back double what we owed.

And so we receive from the Lord's hand double for all our sins. Which payment method will put on file? The same payment method as the pitiful servant, which you can never pay back? Or will you take advantage of King Jesus, who has infinite riches in His royal treasury, and who is the most generous King imaginable?

If you have received from the Lord's hand double for all your sins, then hear these words applying the truths of our passage to our lives. Firstly, beware the sin of greed. Greed is a sneaky one, and can come upon you unawares. The first step is always when we forget that we are stewards and don't really own the things in our house in the first place. They belong to God. He has entrusted them to our care for a time. If and when He wants them back or takes them from us, we can avoid much pain and grief by remembering that they were His in the first place. Secondly, we need to be generous towards other people. It is difficult to be greedy if our mindset is one of generosity. Giving is the opposite of stealing. A simple point, but one to bear in mind. What's "mine" is God's, therefore I will share it. Beware the sin of greed. Instead, seek to cultivate a spirit of generosity and be looking for ways to give to others, rather than looking out for number 1.

Secondly, we take responsibility for our actions. This is a major sign of maturity in life. Instead of always wanting to shift the blame, we should instead take responsibility for our actions. Now, it is possible to take this too far, and seek to be responsible for actions that were not in fact ours. This is what happens when people worry. They think they are responsible for something which they are really only supposed to pray about and be concerned for. Paul Tripp talks about two circles, one inside the other. The inner circle has all those things that we are actually responsible for, and the outer circle includes all those things, but also adds those things we are concerned about. We run into trouble when we make the inner circle (things we are responsible for) too small or too large. If we make it too small, then are attempting to escape our responsibility before God. If we make it too large, then we will feel guilty about things that were never our responsibility in the first place. It is important, therefore, to recognize what it is we are responsible for, and what it is that we are merely to pray over.

We have seen that our possessions belong to God. He has paid for our sins through the person and work of Jesus Christ. This enables us to live a life of generosity, like Zacchaeus, and not one of theft, or escaping our responsibilities. What's ours is God's, therefore we will share.