

Ephesians 4:28

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing good with his own hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need.

The Fulfilling of the Great Commission

One of the points that I made to the people who came to Missions in the Manse Friday night was that the Great Commission cannot be fulfilled by people who do not know biblical doctrine. One of my reasons for saying this went like this: the Great Commission says, " . . . teaching them to observe whatever I commanded you. . . " In other words, we fulfill the Great Commission when we teach the peoples of the earth to obey the commandments of Jesus.

Evangelical Obedience and Evangelical Doctrine

But not just any kind of obedience will do. It must be free, evangelical obedience that flows from a transformed mind. And the only way to produce evangelical obedience is to teach evangelical doctrine. If you try to get people to obey new commandments without showing them a new view of the holiness of God and the bondage of sin and the cross of Christ and the necessity of faith, all you will produce is legalism, not true obedience.

So if you want a people to stop stealing from each other, you can say, "Don't steal any more!" And if they say, "Why not?" you may say, "Because God commanded, 'Thou shalt not steal!' (Exodus 20:15). And they might stop stealing. But are they observing what Jesus commanded? Is this evangelical obedience?

Maybe they are obeying the command because they are afraid they will be caught and punished. Maybe they don't see the goodness and wisdom and beauty of the command at all. Maybe inside they are as covetous as ever, and the command has only put a cork on the ferment of their inner greed. That is not free evangelical obedience.

So the Great Commission is not fulfilled in such cases. Why? Because the commands of Jesus were not taught as the fruit of evangelical doctrine. The people were not told what the command not to steal has to do with the character of God and the sinful nature of man and the sufficiency of the cross and the desperate need for regeneration and the divine command to walk by faith. How can we produce anything but legalists if we command people to bear the fruit of obedience but we never plant the tree of faith in the soil of biblical doctrine?

Teaching People Not to Steal

How then shall we teach a people not to steal? Let us follow Paul's example here in Ephesians 4. In fact I think all of Paul's letters are examples of how to fulfill the second half of the Great Commission, namely, to teach converts to obey what Jesus commanded.

How does he do it? He teaches three chapters of deep and God-centered doctrine to start with. Then here in our text he builds a theological model for all obedience (4:22–24). Then he gives illustrations of practical acts of obedience in verses 25ff. In verse 25 he says, "Don't lie; speak truth." In verses 26–27 he says, "Don't hold an angry grudge." In verse 28 he says, "Don't steal; work and give." And so on.

What we need to remember when we read and teach these commandments is that they must be seen in relation to the original model in verses 22–24. The model said this: obeying the commands of Jesus is like taking off an old self and putting on a new self. The old self is corrupt because of bad desires that come from deceit. The new self is created after the likeness of God in righteousness and holiness that come from truth.

Evangelical Obedience Is God's Creation

So becoming a true Christian means that a miracle happens—something like the first creation of man happens all over again. Evangelical obedience is not just turning over a new leaf by dint of will power in order to please a new deity. Evangelical obedience is the creation of God. It is the fruit of the Spirit, not the work of the flesh.

What is the key to this new evangelical obedience? Verse 23 says, "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind." A deep inner renewal must take place, before there can be true evangelical obedience. If we try to teach obedience to Jesus without this inner renovation, all we will get is pharisaism.

And where does this renewed mind come from? It comes from God! According to verse 24 the new self is created! Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." The renewed mind is the creation of God, not man.

But how does God renew the spirit of the mind? He does it by overcoming the deceit of verse 22 and by applying the truth mentioned in verse 24. This is what I meant when I said, the only way to produce evangelical obedience is to teach evangelical doctrine (truth). Evangelical obedience is free and glad obedience that comes from a transformed mind that sees the goodness and beauty of God's ways and wants to be holy as he is holy. And the

evangelical doctrine that God uses to produce this fruit is the truth that God loves sinners and Christ died for sinners, and the Holy Spirit regenerates sinners and it is all of grace and received by faith.

And if one should ask, "How then should I not lie?" the evangelical answer is, "By FAITH!" Or: "How shall I be free from my angry grudges?" "By FAITH!" Or: "How shall I not steal?" "By FAITH!" Evangelical obedience says, "I am crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live BY FAITH in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

The Point of This Introduction

The point of all this is that when we come to verse 28, we must not forget verses 22–24. And when we go to the mission field, we must not forget our doctrine. Without verses 22–24, all we will get out of verse 28 is legalistic capitalism. And without biblical doctrine, all we will get on the mission field is legalistic syncretism.

That is not what we want. So let's go to verse 28 and take with us the model of verses 22–24 and see what we find for our lives this morning and for our teaching. There is more here than you at first would think.

Three Commands

To begin, notice that the verse really has three commands.

1. First, "Let the thief no longer steal."
2. Second, "But rather let him labor, performing with his hands what is good."
3. Third, let the aim of this labor be that he may be able to give to those in need.

There is a progression here from an inferior to superior way of life. First, you can steal in order to have. Second, you can work in order to have. Third, you can work in order to give. The first two ways of life describe an illegal and a legal way of satisfying the drive of covetousness and greed. You can be driven by greed to steal and you can be driven by greed to work. One is illegal; the other is legal. Both are sinful.

That is why Paul doesn't stop there. Working in order to have is perhaps an American ideal—if you earned it you should have it. But it is NOT a Christian ideal. The most radical thing about this text is that we are commanded to do all our secular work with a view to meeting the needs of

others. You can live to HAVE, either legally or illegally. Or you can become a Christian and live to give. This is a thrilling teaching! I think it has the potential of changing your whole life.

But let's take the three commands as they come and then close with this revolutionizing thought that all the money you earn at your secular job is meant by God to enable you to share with others in need.

"Let the Thief No Longer Steal": Three Comments

First, the text simply repeats the eighth commandment: "Thou shalt not steal!" —"Let the thief no longer steal!" Now in view of the model in verses 22–24 what can we say about stealing and the Christian? Three things.

1. Stealing Is Part of the Old Self

Stealing is part of the old self that we are to strip off (v. 22). Stealing is part of the corruption that comes from deceitful desires. Stealing comes from being deceived about what is truly desirable.

Satan came to Jesus in the wilderness and tempted him to turn stones into bread and to short-circuit the way of the cross. "Don't go the way of self-denial; use the powers at your disposal to get what you really want in the easiest way, not the painful way." And so Satan comes to us and tempts us to steal—to steal from our employees with unjust wages, or from our employers with shoddy work and extended breaks, or from the store by shoplifting, or from the government on our tax returns. He tempts us to steal and short-circuit the way of justice and hard work. And he lies and says that the fleeting pleasure of possession is better than a hard day's work, and a clear conscience, and a love for other people. And those who are deceived steal.

Jesus says in Matthew 15:19, "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft . . ." Where does stealing come from? It comes from the heart—a heart that is corrupt with desires born out of deceit. That is the first thing to say about stealing and the Christian. It is part of the old corrupt nature. It should be stripped off and thrown away.

2. Stealing Can Be Forgiven

The second thing to say is that stealing can be forgiven. Verse 28 says, "Let the thief [literally: him who steals] no longer steal." Here is a person who has been a thief, a person who used to steal all the time—a person who ripped off a hundred cars or stereos; a person who lifted a pack of gum every

time he went through the checkout counter; a self-employed person who has never reported honorariums or trade agreements on his tax returns.

And Paul says there is hope for this thief. He can be forgiven. He can be changed and stop stealing and have a new future in righteousness and holiness. And if he thinks it is too late, what shall we say to him? We shall remind him of Luke 23:43 where the life-long thief in the hour of his death cried out, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power." And Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." So great is the power of the cross to forgive sinners.

That is the second thing we can say about stealing. It can be forgiven. It is not too late for any who is willing to repent and turn to Christ for cleansing and for power to steal no more.

3. Stealing Must Be Overcome by Faith

The third thing to say about stealing is that it must be overcome by faith. Any other way of overcoming stealing may be a short-term benefit to society and keep a man out of jail. But it won't keep him out of hell, and therefore on the scale of eternity is not very much help and not very deep love.

If the thief's obedience is to be evangelical obedience—the internal obedience of the saved (Hebrews 5:9; John 3:36) and not the external obedience of the lost (Matthew 23:25–28)—then the spirit of his mind has to be renewed by the application of evangelical doctrine in the power of the Holy Spirit. Verse 24 says that the new self that no longer steals is the creation of God in righteousness and holiness, and that the instrument of his creation is the truth. You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free! (John 8:32).

What truth does God use to free the thief from the compulsion to steal? There are dozens of answers in Scripture. For example, Hebrews 13:5–6, Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never fail you nor forsake you." Hence we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?"

What this teaches is that the craving for things which drive us to steal is owing to unbelief in the promises of God. The Lord who owns all the cattle on a thousand hills, who has the wisdom to design the DNA and the Milky Way, who rules the world down to the death of little birds in Bangladesh, and who did not spare his own Son—that Lord of lords and King of kings has promised his people, "I will never leave you nor forsake you!"

I ask you, can you believe this and yet steal just to add a little to your security or your pleasure? "In HIS presence is fullness of joy, at HIS right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Psalm 16:11). That is the third thing we can say about stealing: it must be overcome BY FAITH.

An Illustration of Fighting by Faith

Let me give you an illustration of how I fought that fight of faith last week. Mid-way through September I got my water and sewer bill. It was \$84.20. At the bottom in a little box it said, "Pay gross after September 30, \$88.41."

I set the bill aside in a pile of mail and forgot about it until Friday. Friday was October 3rd. I thought to myself—or was it really just me thinking to myself?—I have always paid my bills on time; I am a good citizen; I am only three days late; I could date the check Sept. 30 and they would probably let it go; then I wouldn't waste four dollars.

But then another "me" began to speak: it is your fault for not sending it in on time; it is not unjust for them to charge more for delinquent payments; the Spirit of Christ is submissive to the ruling authorities where it doesn't require compromise with sin; a clear conscience is more valuable than four dollars; my master has bidden me not to steal; and he has promised never to leave me nor forsake me; if it would be good for me, he can heal a cavity in my tooth and make up this four dollar loss with a forty dollar savings on the dentist bill. The Lord reigns! And so I believed the promise of God and put to death the old deceived self and put on the new self and wrote a check for \$88.41.

That is the first command of our text (Eph. 4:28), "Don't steal! Live by faith! Believe in the promises of God!"

"Let Him Labor"

I want to hasten on to the third command, but let me make a brief comment about the second in passing. The second command of verse 28 is, ". . . but rather let him labor, performing with his hands what is good." Two simple observations.

God Ordained Work

One is that God has ordained work, not stealing, as the way of getting what we need. Work is not a curse. Adam was put in the garden to tend it before the fall. Boredom and frustration and futility in work—these are the curse of our fallen age. But work itself is a good gift of God. How could it be

otherwise since God is the greatest worker of all and we are created in his image?

Work Should Be the Doing of Something Good

The other observation from this second command in verse 28 is that the work we do for a living should be the doing of something good. The RSV is not quite accurate here. Literally it says, "Let him [i.e., the former thief] labor, working with his own hands the good." God is not indifferent to what you do for a living. You belong to him first. He is your main boss and you will give an account to him of how you spent your working life. The text says, instead of stealing, work; but it doesn't just say work, as though any and all work is acceptable for the Christian. It says "Perform the good." So test your vocation! Is it the performing of what is good?

"So That He May Be Able to Give to Those in Need"

But now as we close by looking at the third command in the text, notice that a shift of focus takes place. At first Paul seems to be focused on what we do—don't steal, work! But in this last part of the verse his focus turns to the motive for working and not stealing.

He says, the goal and purpose that God has for his people is not reached when they simply quit stealing. And the goal and purpose that God has for his people is not reached when they labor hard with their hands, even doing good in order to possess the money they earn. But he says finally that the goal of God for his people, in all their gainful employment, is reached when they work in order to have so that they can give to those in need.

This is utterly revolutionary. Do you see what it does? It takes the whole of your life, including your secular job, and turns it into a work of grace. Paul wants you to think of your secular job as means to display God's grace. No more stealing in the service of illegal greed. No more working in the service of legal greed. But now everything is in the service of grace not greed. Don't steal to have. Don't work to have. But work to have in order to give.

Why? Because this is what it means to walk by faith. The very essence of faith is the delight of the soul in the experience and display of God's grace. And so faith is the power, by grace, to be content with what we have. And faith is also the power, by grace, to be DIScontent with what others DON'T have. And so faith doesn't have to steal or hoard in order to be happy. But it does have to give and share in order to be happy. The inflow of God's grace satisfies the heart of faith, and the overflow of God's grace satisfies the

needs of others. And faith is utterly addicted to these experiences and displays of the grace of God.

Living to Give and Displaying the Power of Grace

And so we return to where we began. If there is to be evangelical obedience, there must be evangelical doctrine about God and his sovereign grace. What are the purposes of God in your life? What is the work of God in your life? Verse 24 says, "Put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God." There it is! We are created by God to be the likeness and the image of God in the world. When people see your life and study why you work, do they see a display of the grace of God?

They will if you don't steal in order to have, and don't work in order to have, but work in order to have so that you can give. Put on the new nature, and make your whole life a display of the power of grace. Don't live to get; live to give! Amen.