

Sharing with Those in Need

Our society is plagued with fraud, deceit, and thievery. Each year, 27 million people shoplift, costing us \$13 billion per year. Researchers report that 30% of business failures are primarily due to fraud. The worst part of this grim picture is that studies also show very little difference between the behavior of those who claim to be Christians and of those who claim no faith in Christ. In Paul's day, most of the church members were being converted from Paganism and were immersed in that culture, so Paul had to explain in clear terms that they were to differentiate sharply from those around them. We, too, need this lesson:

Ephesians 4:28

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.

Paul is teaching here three major concepts.

I. Don't take other people's stuff (v. 28a)

In the churches Paul planted there were, typically, many people who came from rough, immoral backgrounds. Look at I Corinthians 6:9-11, for example. Isn't it wonderful that God saves really corrupt sinners like you and me?

In the Westminster Larger Catechism, we are given a fuller description of what stealing entails (see below***). In this description we all see ourselves in many ways: we steal people's ideas, we fail to return borrowed things, we take advantage of the businesses and firms we work for, we slack off on the job, we evade paying all the taxes we owe, we fail to disclose the problems in our cars and houses when selling them, etc. Convicted yet?

Paul says we must no longer do this, because we belong now to Him.

II. Work hard for your stuff (v. 28b)

The Christian answer to all forms of stealing is to work hard and to work honestly. As we learn in Genesis 2:15: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it." Our work is just as sacred as the preachers', because God ordained it. In Ephesians 6:6-9, we also see the sanctity of our work, because our real master is no less than Jesus Christ Himself! We, therefore, are hard, honest workers.

III. Share your stuff with others (v. 28c)

The opposite of theft is generosity. Paul gives here the reason that we work hard: we earn money to share with others. John Wesley once said, "Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can."

Actually, most of us are pretty good at sharing—with our children and grandchildren. In fact, we often share so much that we ruin them! Notice Paul says here, "to share with anyone *in need*." (Italics added)

For those of us who hire and manage people, we can begin by examining our pay scales. The national minimum wage is \$7.25/hr. Economists tell us that nobody can actually support himself adequately on such a wage. The minimum "living wage" in Tennessee right now is \$9.76/hr. Have you thought about reducing your own salary so that others can flourish economically?

We must also take a hard look at the poverty and chaos of the most vulnerable people in this city. Seventy-five percent of our third graders are not reading at grade level. Forty percent of the children in our city live below the poverty line. The good news is that when we actually spend quality time and give loving attention and devote serious resources toward these kids, we see remarkable progress.

Michael Oh is CEO of The Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization. Before assuming that role, he spent several years leading major ministry efforts in Japan. Here's his advice to North Americans on giving to the mission of Christ: since we live in the wealthiest society in the history of the world (anyone making \$50,000/yr. is in the top 1% of wage earners in the world), he suggests that those making up to \$50,000/yr. tithe to their churches and then also give 5% of their income to missions outside the local church. For those making \$50,000-\$150,000/yr., he suggests we give a tithe to the local church and another 10% to the Christian mission beyond the local church. For those making \$150,000-\$500,000/yr., we give a tithe to the church and 20% beyond the local church. For those making more than \$500,000/yr. we give a tithe to the church and 40% to the Christian mission beyond the local church. What do you think?

The calling is clear. We no longer manage our working lives and our personal property just to please ourselves but rather, we work hard so that we can have something to give to those who are in need.

The reason we do so is also clear. Paul said in II Corinthians 8:9: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."

***Westminster Larger Catechism Questions 141, 142:

Question 141: What are the duties required in the eighth commandment?

Answer: The duties required in the eighth commandment are, truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to everyone 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.

Question 142: What are the sins forbidden in the eighth commandment?

Answer: The sins forbidden in the eighth commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are, theft, robbery, man-stealing, and receiving any thing 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 depopulations; 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.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the most common forms of stealing that you observe in people's lives each week? Why is stealing so costly to our society? Why is stealing particularly harmful when committed by Christians?
2. Why should we think of our gainful employment or our studies as sacred? What difference does that perspective make in the way we perform our daily tasks?
3. How does Christian conversion change the way we think about our ability to make money?
4. Name some folks who are the 21st century version of those "in need."
5. Describe what happens to a person who, for Christ's sake, becomes generous.

Going Deeper

1. How do you need to change your perspectives and your conduct in order to conform to the standard Paul articulates in Ephesians 4:28?
2. Plan your charitable giving for next year: