

Stealing from God and Others:

Another Sin to Shed Like a Cheap Suit

How many potential sins are there? I thought about this the other day as I was driving. How many possible combinations of sin are there to violate the laws of God and break His heart?

Paul selected five sins that we need to shed like a cheap suit. It's not an extensive list. These five sins must have been upon the heart of the Holy Spirit, so he wanted Paul to emphasize them to these Ephesian believers, not only to that church but to today's church.

Ephesians 4:25-28

25 Therefore, putting away lying, "*Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,*" for we are members of one another. 26 "*Be angry, and do not sin:*" do not let the sun go down on your wrath, 27 nor give place to the devil. 28 Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with *his* hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.

In verse 25, The first sin we must deal with is lying. Put it away. Stop lying. That's easy to understand. Number two was unrighteous anger. We talked about that in verses 26 and 27. Anger that is selfish, undisciplined, and vindictive. You know, the type of mindset that says I'm going to get even with you. Because you hurt me, I'm coming back with a vengeance.

What is amazing to me is that, once again, Paul is not talking to a pagan society. He's talking to the church people who went to service every week. They believed in Christ, and he's talking to them, of all things, about stealing. Look, verse 28 says,

Let him who stole steal no longer.

That's pretty straightforward. You don't have to be a Bible scholar to understand that God is saying to us, Stop stealing. I don't know if anyone is completely free from the temptation to steal. Many children go through a phase of thinking it's fun.

We went to Bob's Five and Dime when I was a little guy. Oh, that was a great store. They had so many neat little things and things that I could reach. Apparently, I had reached up and found a little blue car, which was a honey. And so, on the way home from Bob's Five and Dime. My mom looked in the back seat, and there I was, playing with my new little car. She said, Honey, where did you get that car? To be honest with you, I don't know what I said, but whatever it was was enough for my mom to know

that I had taken it. My dad turned that car around, and we went right back to where? Bob's Five and Dime. My mom marched me in there, and I had to go in there and give the little car back and apologize because I had stolen it. I had taken something that didn't belong to me. My mom made me take it back.

As parents, you want to be proud of your kids, don't you? As you see them developing integrity and character, you want to be able to say, that's my boy. That's my girl right there. Well, the same is true in the kingdom of God. God's telling us not to be angry, lie, or steal because he wants to look at your life as a believer and beam with pride. That's my boy. That's my girl, my son, my daughter. There's nothing more we should have for our life's goal than pleasing our Heavenly Father with our lives.

The Bible says, (Listen, this is important if you're planning to take an ox or a sheep) In Exodus 22:1

If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep.

The thief, when caught, has to do something that no other sinner has to do. For instance, if a man commits murder, he can be forgiven but can't bring the person he killed back to life. But the man who steals can make full restitution. He can pay it back.

Remember Zacchaeus, the little guy that climbed the tree to see Jesus? He was a tax collector and a crook. Everybody knew he stole. Jesus stopped at the tree Zacchaeus had climbed, looked up, and said, Hey, come on, buddy, I'm going to your house today. We're going to have lunch." When that lunchtime was over, and Jesus went on his way, Zacchaeus said he would give half of everything he owned to the poor, and if I've ripped anybody off, I'm going to restore them fourfold. If I took one, I'm going to give them back four.

A shoplifter wrote these words to a department store. "I've just become a Christian, and I can't sleep at night because I feel guilty. So here's \$100 that I owe you." He signed his name, and then he added a little PS. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."

The eighth Commandment, "You Shall not steal," is probably broken more than any other commandment. Stealing has become so commonplace that today we often speak of the "common thief." It's not unusual to hear that somebody has stolen from someone else. It happens all the time.

Just as Satan is a liar and a murderer, he is also a thief. The thief does not come except to steal, kill, and destroy. Satan turned Judas into a thief and can do the same to us today. When he tempted Eve, he helped her become a thief, for she took the forbidden fruit. God said, Don't touch it, but she did, and in turn, she made Adam a thief.

The first Adam was a thief, and God cast him out of Paradise. But the last Adam, Christ, turned to a thief on the cross and said, Today you will be with me in Paradise. Aren't you glad that God can redeem a thief? Huh? He kicked one out of Paradise and took another one in.

Don't Steal from Others

I don't believe I'm speaking to anyone who could be labeled a common crook, a pickpocket, a bank robber, or an embezzler. Still, subtle forms of stealing go on every day, which are overlooked and ignored.

Major retailers report that shoplifters walk off with between ten and \$12 billion of stolen items yearly. Employees are doing a large percentage of the theft. The very people that you're paying are the ones that are ripping you off. Cable companies lose millions of dollars to people who tap into their service without paying the hookup fee. People steal millions from recording artists by downloading music via the Internet. Twenty-four percent of Americans say they lied and cheated on their income tax at an annual cost of about \$100 billion to the government. Jesus said to pay your taxes. One-third of college students say they would cheat on an exam if they didn't think they'd get caught.

Grand larceny, petty theft, reneging on a debt, and not paying full and fair wages are more examples of stealing. How about this one? Have you ever pocketed the money when a clerk overpays in change? People steal identities. Identity theft is climbing at an alarming rate.

A recent survey by several large corporations concluded that the average employee steals about six weeks of wages per year from his employer. How in the world can they do that? By goofing off on the job. By conducting personal business on company time. By coming in late and leaving early, extending lunch breaks, padding expense accounts, reporting more hours than they worked, and orbiting around the coffee pot or the water cooler too long. Do you know that when you get to your job, it's no longer your time? You're on the clock whether you're punching in or not.

There is simply no end to ways that we can steal today. Stealing has become a game in which getting caught is the only cause of shame and regret. I had a young man in my youth group when I was a youth pastor in Quincy, Illinois, and Denny was just the greatest little guy. He always wanted to be with me, always wanted to shadow me. One day, years later, I asked how the kids were doing back in Quincy, and they said Denny had died. He embezzled \$30,000 from his work, and when he realized he had got caught, he hung himself—my little buddy, one of the most faithful kids in youth service—that one hurt.

There was once a day in America when the slogan "Honest Day for an Honest Dollar was the accepted norm." But now it seems like the primary job for so many in the workforce is to devise clever ways to beat the system and stick it to the man. Cut corners. Don't give your best. Watch the clock and get excited when it's time to punch out and go home. Thirty-three percent of workers confess to falsely phoning in sick and collecting sick pay.

By forbidding us to steal, God is pointing us toward work. As a Christian in the workplace, please understand that your greatest witness at work is your work. You can pass out tracts and share scripture verses, but if you're not giving your company the best of who you are as unto the Lord, you're ripping them off.

There's something about giving your best, not complaining, not griping all the time, and having a good attitude. When you go to work, your workplace will either be a minefield or a mission field, and it's all based upon the attitude of your mind. How do you look at your job when you go there? Will you just do it and get out as fast as possible or be the best employee they have ever had? When other people may be complaining and griping and murmuring, avoid that like the plague.

Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.

And then Paul comes along, and he adds motive to his admonishments. We should tell the truth because we are members one of another. We should control our anger because we don't want to give a place to the devil. Then we should work and not steal so that we can give. We run into needy people every day, no matter where we go.

As a Christian, why should I go to work? The answer will help you tomorrow morning when the alarm goes off.

Work to Honor God

First of all, we work to bring glory to God. A lazy Christian robs, first of all, himself of phenomenal blessings. He robs others, and most importantly, he robs God of what is rightfully His. First Corinthians 10:31 says,

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Whether you're scrubbing a floor or performing brain surgery, the quality of your work and the integrity you bring to your job can bring glory and honor to the Lord. You're at work, hitting it hard and giving it your best. You're not a griper or a complainer. You're just doing the job that they paid you at the very beginning to do. That makes you a

light that will shine in the darkness. People will step back and say, what in the world is happening with that guy? Why isn't he like everybody else?

Colossians 3:23

And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men,

Work like you are working for the Lord, not for men. Don't you see? As Christians, our values and our perspective are entirely different. You're not working for the man. You're working for the master. God is the one who gave you the job, and God is the one who gives you the strength to do the job.

Work to Gain a Livelihood.

Every Jewish rabbi was taught a trade. The rabbis said, If you do not teach your son a trade, you teach him to be a thief. So if you don't teach your son how to do something, he will do nothing. It's God's plan for everyone to work who can work. 2 Thessalonians 3:10 says:

For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies.

Do you like eating? If you like to eat, you might want to think about working because Paul says if anyone does not work, neither let him eat.

For we here see these rumors going around, Paul says, that some of you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all. You are sitting around praising the Lord, expecting everybody else to cater to you and wait on you. You feel entitled, and Paul says, That's not the Gospel we preach. Get up and do something. Because when you're doing something, you're opening the door for God to do a miracle.

There is no such thing as a little job if you do it as unto the Lord. Don't say if I get a better job, a higher paying job, then it will truly count for something. No, whatever you get paid, whatever job you're doing, do it as unto the Lord. If you sit around thinking, I'm not getting promoted here, maybe you're not getting promoted because God is looking at the quality of your work, and he realizes that you're not giving your best shot.

God sees your job, and He knows the quality of your work. So, if you're doing your job and giving it all you've got, God in heaven sees you.

God can take a Joseph, who's in a prison, and raise him up to be vice president of Egypt. God can lift you up, raise you up, send you out, and use you in a phenomenal way.

If you're doing a job and realize you could have done that better, stop, take a moment, and do it again. Do it until you can say in your heart, I've given all I have because I want to please my heavenly Father.

God is referring to God-honoring employment. As believers, we should never engage in a job that demands a compromise of our godly standards or a violation of scripture, one that is illegal, or mistreats or harms other people in any way. If you're working for a company, and they say, We want you to do this, and you know it's not legal, or it's going to hurt somebody, you may need to swallow hard and just say, wait a minute. As a believer, I can't do that.

There is joy in meeting life's basic needs through an honest day's work. The Bible says in Genesis 2:15:

Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.

God created it, and then he says to man, now you tend to it and take care of it. I'm putting it in your hands now. See what you can do. Work is not a part of God's curse. It's part of God's plan.

Now, those weeds. Those weeds and thorns we encounter on the job result from the fall. Do you have weeds, thorns, thistles, or any weeds where you work? Some things will distract you and keep you from wanting to give your very best.

There could be some injustices, some things that aren't fair. Are you being overlooked? Leave that to God. Stay focused. Keep your heart fixed and say to yourself, I am doing this for the Lord, and God knows.

God will take care of you. Your God's pretty rich. Well, if God's so rich, why do I have to work at all? Because Jesus said, my Father is always working, so I must work. I can't sit around doing nothing. My Father sent me for a purpose.

After you've put in a long day of work, don't you guys feel good when you come home knowing that you've given your very best? Because that's what God created us to do. You can provide when you see someone in need and help them and support and encourage them. There's nothing like that in all of the world. I want to encourage you along the way.

I think that's why I get such a kick out of our hikers' ministry. I know it's a costly endeavor to hike the whole trail, but I know we have some people that come through

there that don't have much of anything. It's just so nice to honor the Lord by honoring them. And that's a good feeling.

Work to have something to share

We work so that we have something to give those who have a need. Giving makes our work sacred because it enables us to follow the example of God. God so loved the world that he gave. God did not send his son into the world to steal from us but to give to us.

We work to have. We live to give. Is there anything more exciting than when you can share from your heart? You don't have to rip off Peter to pay Paul. It's coming straight from the labor of your hand.

So why do I glorify God through the labor of my hands? So that I can provide for myself and my family, honor the Lord, and have something to share with others.

Don't Steal From God

It's a horrible thing to steal from another person. What's worse than stealing from your neighbor? How about robbing God?

Malachi raised an interesting question. Will a man rob God? The prophet Malachi warned the entire nation that they were attempting to rip off God yet were still expecting God to bless them. With one hand, you're ripping Him off, and with another empty hand, you're holding it up, saying, Will you give to me? When you're not blessing God, why should he bless you? O Israel? Oh, how have we robbed God with your tithes and your offerings? Does God need your tithe and your offering? No, But you need to give your tithe and offering so that the blessings continue to flow in your life.

Well, Pastor, I can't afford to give my tithes. Listen, if I read the Book of Malachi correctly (and the principle carries over into the New Testament), you can't afford not to give to God. When you give to God from your heart, He opens the windows of heaven and pours out upon you a blessing that you cannot even contain. Then God says, okay, now start passing it out.

God keeps pushing it in. You keep giving it out, and that's the fun of serving the Lord through giving.

So, we can rip God off in our finances, but we can also steal from the Lord when we don't spend quality time in His presence. Every day He gives all of us the same amount of time. What percentage of your day can you give to God? Understand, all 24 hours you will have are a gift from Him. My life, revolves around you. I want to spend time

talking and fellowshiping with you because that's what You created me to do. If you blow God off and don't spend quality time with Him, you're hurting yourself.

You're the one that is missing out on the joy of his presence. That's why some Christians are so miserable. They look like they've been baptized in lemon juice because they're just not spending time with God. You cannot hang with the Lord for very long without being delighted in him.

When we fail to develop and invest the talents He gives us, we steal from God. God has put something inside of you that he wants you to take and develop so that you can use it to reach the world and glorify him. Whatever you do, glorify the Lord while doing it.

When we don't share the Gospel with others, we steal from God. We can do a lot in the name of the Lord. We can give a lot. We can bless a lot. We can help a lot, but nothing glorifies Jesus more than when we share the love of God with somebody and they say yes to the Lord.

When we don't share the Gospel, it's like we're stealing it. We're keeping it for ourselves, which has never been God's plan. Let's not steal from God and the lost by withholding the good news of a savior. Let's work hard at sharing Christ with people.

Look at your hands. Paul talks about using our hands. Your hands can take stuff that doesn't belong to you. You could go out and hotwire a car in the parking lot if you see one you like. Or, with that same hand, you can be a giver. Look for ways to give, and ask the Holy Spirit to help you become sensitized to his leadership and direction. Encourage somebody, support somebody, give this somebody something that says, I see you. You're visible to me.

And you know what? When we start sharing the good news of Christ, that stems from the reality of our relationship with Christ. It's natural. Witnessing is your joy—the joy of the Lord. You're happy in your relationship with God.

Don't steal from people. Don't steal from God. Don't steal from yourself.