

March 7, 2010  
**First Things First ... What's Mine is the Lord's**  
**Deuteronomy 5:19**

When I attended theological college, the theology library was housed in the main Acadia University Library as part of their collection. The theology section had the highest rate of theft of any section in the library! When I lived in Edmonton, theft of materials from the library of the Christian college I taught in was also epidemic!

George Gallup, of the Gallup polling organization, concludes that though religion is still relatively popular in the U.S., morality has declined. When Gallup asked Americans questions about expense accounts, income taxes, etc., there was virtually no difference in attitudes towards honesty between people who claimed to be Christians and those who had no religious beliefs.

When we come to the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment, "*Do not steal!*" (Deuteronomy 5:19), we assume that stealing is not an issue for most of us in the church ... but apparently it is! Once again, it is helpful to keep in mind that this is one expression of the great command, "*Love your neighbour as yourself*" (Romans 13:9). It is also helpful to look at this command positively: "*Protect the property rights of others.*" Let's look at three possible attitudes toward property ...

1. "*What's yours is mine ...*"

We can take things from other people that don't rightfully belong to us. This is what we normally think of when we think of stealing. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (told to illustrate what it means to "*love your neighbour as yourself*"), he talks of bandits who attack and rob a traveler (Luke 10:25-37). The bandits steal!

In the prophets, God also accuses people in Israel for stealing by using dishonest weigh scales, for cheating people out of property, for selling people into slavery ... Obviously we would agree that such stealing is wrong! But so is taking library books that belong to someone else. So is taking tax money that rightfully belongs to the government. Some of the Jewish leaders said to Jesus: "*Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right and are not influenced by what others think. You teach the way of God truthfully. Now tell us - is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*" He saw through their trickery and said, "*Show me a Roman coin. Whose picture and title are stamped on it?*" "*Caesar's,*" they replied. "*Well then,*" he said, "*give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.*" (Luke 20:21-25).

We can take other things than material goods from people - like their good name. In *Othello*, Shakespeare writes, "*He that filches from me my good name / Robs me of that which not enriches him / And makes me poor indeed.*" How do we do steal someone's good name? By gossip. By slander. By innuendo ... Jesus lists the sins with which we struggle most as: "*evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all other sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander*" (Matthew 15:19).

Significantly "slander" and "theft" are listed alongside murder and adultery as among the most serious of sins!

## 2. *"What's mine is mine ..."*

In the story of the Good Samaritan, good religious people - a priest and a Levite (a Temple assistant) - pass the victim of the crime, but do not want to get involved. What was theirs was theirs - time, safety, money, compassion. And that was that.

The Bible calls us to have compassion for those who are less fortunate. One of the great sins of the people of Israel, according to the prophets, was lack of compassion for the poor and less fortunate (read Amos or Micah).

We can also say, *"What's mine is mine,"* to God. The Bible's view toward property is: *"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it"* (Psalm 24:1). God gives us all we have! It is His good pleasure that gives us the health, talent, ability, and opportunity to earn a living. While we may think we are "self-made" people, we are genuinely "God-made" people. Being honest with ourselves, it could all disappear in the twinkling of an eye (just ask Job - or stock holders!).

This being the case, God's command is that we give a portion of our blessings back to His work, as a gift of thanksgiving to minister to the needs of others. The Bible calls this giving tithes (a regular percentage giving) and offerings (special gifts) to God.

One of the most solemn warnings - and greatest promises - in Scripture is in Malachi 3:7-10: God says, *"Ever since the days of your ancestors, you have scorned my laws and failed to obey them. Now return to me, and I will return to you. But you ask, 'How can we return when we have never gone away?' Should people cheat God? Yet you have cheated me! But you ask, 'What do you mean? When did we ever cheat you?' You have cheated me of the tithes and offerings due to me. You are under a curse, for your whole nation has been cheating me. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do," says the LORD Almighty, "I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Let me prove it to you!"*

Sometimes, when it comes to God, we may be guilty of "first-rate stinginess" or "second-rate sacrifice" argues Stuart Briscoe.

According to Deuteronomy 14, the Israelites were to give the first 10% of all they produced to the Lord. And they were to give a variety of other gifts and offerings above and beyond that minimum as well; these were to be the best of their produce or flocks. By the time of Malachi, people brought offerings to God - of sorts: when a gift of a lamb was required, they went through their flocks and found blind, crippled, or diseased ones to give to God! *"Try giving gifts like that to your governor!"* blasts God, *"and see how pleased he is!"* (Malachi 1:8).

*"But that 10% rule is Old Testament law - and we're under grace not the law in the New*

*Testament (Galatians 3)!" You're right! We are not under that 10% legalism. But most Christians I know who learn that are only excited about freedom in Christ because that means they can get away with giving *less* than the law required! I have only met a handful of people (yes, I have met some!) who have said, "As a Christian, I am free from the 10% law - now I can give 20+% to the Lord!"*

The whole point of the New Testament is that God loved us so much that He gave us everything - His only Son! He held nothing back! He did not only give us 10% (or less) of Himself. He gave us 100%.

Ought we not be willing to give everything (not just a paltry 10% or less ... if we have a bit left over after all we want for ourselves) back to God! If we have really experienced God grace we ought to give more generously ... not less! We don't tithe and give gifts to meet a church budget! We give to bless and thank God! When you give to God, you honour Him. *You say, "God, all my money is a gift from you anyway, and I give it to you with a glad heart."* Through our giving we show we love Him in deed as well as in word.

### *3. "What's mine is the Lord's ..."*

The Samaritan who happened upon the unfortunate traveler understood what the priest and Levite failed to grasp - when we understand that who we are is the result of God's good gifts to us, we delight to pass on God's blessings to other people! God has a heart for people ... when we give to the Lord's work we give to people! We give to people here in our city who need the help and hope this church can provide. We give to children and teens, who can hear of God's love for the first time. We give to people overseas by supporting missionaries and projects who bring practical aid (food, education, shelter), and spiritual hope.

There is a call here to discipleship in our own community: who are those who need compassion on our own community? Many of us are involved with individuals, organizations, or causes that do make a difference in the lives of people around us ... wonderful! Do the people of First B make a difference in Lethbridge? - absolutely! As true Christians (and true Canadians!) we rarely trumpet it from the rooftops, but that's how it ought to be!

And there is also a call to global discipleship: who are the people around the world who need compassion? Again many of us support organizations and missions that make a difference globally ... fantastic! As a church, between 15-20% of all of our money goes to missions beyond our own walls ... this is great. This summer we have an intergenerational team going to Mexico. The more opportunities we have to see how God is at work globally, the more we appreciate that He is doing amazing things here, too.

*"Remember this," writes Paul, "a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each make up your mind as to how much you should give. Don't give reluctantly on in response to pressure. For God loves the person who gives generously. And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always*

*have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others ... For God is the one who gives seed to the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will give you many opportunities to do good, and he will produce a great harvest of generosity in you. Yes, you will be enriched so that you can give even more generously!" (2 Corinthians 9:6-11)*

God calls us not just be active in not doing evil - not stealing ... but to be active in doing good - caring for the property rights of others (both other people, and God).

What this all means is:

1. Guarding against saying "what's yours is mine" - whether that be in relation to a family member, a friend, or the government!
2. Guarding against saying, "what's mine is mine." - by being generous in helping those who are in need. And by being faithful in our tithes and offerings to God.
3. By saying, "What's mine is the Lord's" - having an attitude and spirit of generosity to the Lord's work.

*God's promise is blessing! "Try it! Let me prove it to you!" says the Lord. "All the nations will call you blessed, for your land will be such a delight!" (Malachi 3:10, 12).*

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