

Introduction

I have just a couple installments left in this summer series I am calling “What Not to Wear.” We are not talking about fashion but about the wardrobe of sinful behaviors we are to put off, replacing those with the holy behaviors which honor the calling that is ours in Christ. In the latter part of Ephesians 4, Paul is setting forth specific examples of how the lives of Christ followers will demonstrate the change brought to them by the grace of God in their salvation. If a person is in Christ they are a new creature. Old things passed away; new things have come. Christ-followers are to exhibit a manner of living which is worthy of their glorious inward transformation. The practical steps involved in this pursuit of holiness are three. Put off. Be renewed. And put on. Put off your old self. Be renewed in the spirit of your minds. And put on the new self, made in the likeness of God. In verse 28, Paul gives specific attention to theft.

[Read Text; Pray]

So as we look at this text this morning, I want to begin by considering . . .

I. The Old-Self to Put Off

Paul begins this verse saying, “let the thief no longer steal.” Christ-followers are commanded to put off thievery and stealing.

A. Stealing is sin against God. From his inner being the Lord deplures theft. Commandment number 8 prohibits the act of stealing.

What do you envision when you hear the word stealing? Robbery? Burglary? Larceny? Embezzlement? Mugging? The Greek word Paul used here communicates with us English speakers. The Greek root of the noun, thief, and of the verb steal, is klepto. A couple English words are clearly inspired by this Greek one. We speak of kleptomania and a kleptomaniac. A kleptomaniac is a person who gives in constantly to the urge to steal.

When we envision stealing, we may think of robbers holding up a bank or crooks heisting a valuable work of art or a kleptomaniac. When I think of

stealing, I remember vividly that summer afternoon in Owenton, Kentucky when our house was broken into. Someone knocked our door in and took our stuff. I still feel violated by that incident. The only thing to smile about is that the crook took about a hundred CDs of Christian music.

But we tend to think of theft of being out there, only committed by those people out there. However, consider that 75% of employees have stolen from their employers at least once and 38% at least twice. Business losses due to employee theft amounts to around \$50 million every year. Those costs are passed down to the consumer. But still this is far from all that is included under the banner of stealing. Stealing, broadly, is to take for yourself or for your use what belongs to another person without permission or right.

Joshua Infantado compiled an eye-opening list of some ways we steal. He notes that we steal another's time by not being punctual. We steal from our employer's resources when we slack off on the job. When we make use of pirated media, we are robbing those whose time and effort was put into producing it. Certainly, we steal from God when we hold back what he has entrusted to us to go to him. We also steal when we take the work of others and use it as though it is our own.

I would add a few other examples: cheating, deceitful advertising, charging an excessive price because the buyer is at a disadvantage, and without permission using the property of someone else for my advantage. When you take someone's place in line by stepping in front of them, it essentially, is theft. If you think carefully about the principle, you will realize that there are countless ways in which we commit this sin.

Why does God prohibit stealing? There are a number of reasons. However, I think there are a couple fundamental reasons why God despises stealing. First, stealing refuses to recognize God's sovereign ownership of the world and all things in it. Psalm 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." And not only is God sovereign over the world, He is also sovereign over the allocation of the goods of the world. Human beings are actually never more than STEWARDS of what belongs to GOD. He has ordained in this world that we

are to earn a living by working for it, not by taking what others have worked for. When we steal, we reject God's sovereignty. And we reject God's prescription for work.

Second, theft is driven by greed. We want what we do not have. And we do not want to work honestly in order to obtain what we want. So we act in opposition to God's allocation and God's regulation of how we are to obtain. We seize matters out of God's hands and take them into our own for our own fleshly gain or for that matter to pass our troubles and inconveniences on to someone else.

And third, stealing is the complete opposite to who God is. Robert Definbaugh is completely on point when he states that "Stealing is an act that is completely contrary to the character of God. . . . it is a crime which completely contradicts His character. God is gracious; the thief is greedy. God gives; the thief takes. God responds to the cries of the needy; the thief callously creates needs and tragedy. Nothing could be more contrary to the graciousness of God than the cruelty of the thief." There is far more that could be said here about the sinfulness of stealing. But I hope the evil of theft is clear.

B. What also strikes me here at the outset of verse 28 is that Paul designates the person by connecting them with the sin they commit. The one who steals is a thief. No doubt, we would all have to admit that we have stolen something or other in our lives, especially as we think of the many ways in which we can steal. For some reason we more readily admit that we have stolen than agree that we are thieves. But if you have stolen, you are a thief. James says, if we have broken the law at one point we are a transgressor. I can make my sin seem less convicting if I start to quantify it. But to say I am a transgressor or I am a thief, is to admit that the sin is more than an extraneous mistake and is in fact what proceeds from my heart. And that admission becomes an agreement that I am a sinner from inside myself. I am constituted as a sinner. That is my identity. And I do not like that. I like to think of myself as not that bad, as human, as a person who has made mistakes. But the Bible tells me, in fact Jesus himself tells me, I am defiled because my wickedness comes from my heart. Matthew 15:19-20 is where Jesus is recorded as saying, "For out of the

heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, THEFT, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.”

The glad truth is that defiled people can be forgiven and redeemed. They can be washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ by the Spirit of God. And this includes thieves. In fact every redeemed person is a redeemed thief. The fact is that all have sinned. All have come short of the glory of God. Our sin, our iniquity, has separated us from God and hidden his face from us. Our sin makes us liable to the judgment of God. But he is gracious and longsuffering and he has provided for our forgiveness.

Under the Mosaic ceremonial law, the priest entering the inmost chamber of the temple on the day of atonement was to wear a sleeveless covering across his chest. On it were 12 precious stones each representing and bearing the name of one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The Lord explained to Moses that in this way the high priest would bear the names of the sons of Israel on his heart, when he would go into the holy place, to bring them to regular remembrance before the Lord. How wonderfully that part of the ceremony depicts how Jesus bore on his heart his people as he entered the true temple of God in the heavens to present himself as a justice-satisfying sacrifice. As a result he is able to save those who draw near to God through him because he offered up himself and he lives to intercede for them.

Many in this room have already come to God through Christ in this way. Have you? If not, then bring your thefts and all your sins to Jesus right now. Turn away from sin and trust fully in Jesus and he will save you. He will plead your case before the Father by the blood of his own sacrifice. He will save you now!

Now, those who trust him are made new. And we must bring our living into line with our identity. As he who called you is holy, so you also be holy in all your conduct, including in regard to property.

We next look, then at . . .

II. The New Self to Put On

The new self which Christ followers are to put on has three clear characteristics. There is a new action; a new goal; and a new motive.

A. First, there is a new action. The old man loots. The new man labors. "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands." Stealing lays hold of possessions be they material or immaterial, dishonestly. It seeks to acquire with little to no effort. The diametric opposite of stealing is the honest approach. It also requires effort, lots of effort.

We are so conditioned in the world in which live to having so many things instantaneously and without effort. Our flesh wants the whole of life to be that way. We even want living a disciple's life to be that way. We want perfection without pursuit. But this is clearly not God's way. The God of the universe works and produces, and he has ordained it so that his people made in his image also work. The commandment about the Sabbath says much about work. Six days shall you work.

Listen to Proverbs 6:6-11–

Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man."

Proverbs 18:9 says, "Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys."

Proverbs 13:4 declares, "The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied."

Colossians 3:23 urges, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men."

God praises diligence and disapproves of slothfulness. He desires his people to work eagerly, enthusiastically, and energetically. And God honors the

hard work of honest working people. They produce. To put on the new man is to cease being a predator and start being a producer, and to do so with toil—good, honest labor.

B. So putting on the new man means a new action. It also means adopting on a new goal. He is to work hard with his own hands “so that he may have something to share.” The goal of theft is possess more stuff, more power, more of more. The goal of God-honoring labor is to produce in order to share. Live to give! Greed drives theft. But greed can also drive labor. Stealing inherently dishonors God. Working does not inherently dishonor God, but it can. If the goal of working is to simply get and accumulate and hoard for oneself, then that is not much unlike the man in Jesus’ parable whose fields yielded an abundance. He had more than his barns could hold. He solved the problem not by giving but by keeping. He decided to tear down those barns and build bigger ones. He rejoiced in his great amassed supply, but that night the Lord called him to account. He was rich but not toward God. All those goods did him no good at the judgment. The Lord does not entrust us the things of this world to hoard but to provide and to share. The new man does not earn more to be able to blow more. He earns in order to share.

C. Putting on the new man means a new action (work) and a new goal (sharing), but it also means a new motive. Rather than greed, his motive is need. Rather than focused on oneself, the focus of the new man is on others. Whom can I help? Who needs what I have? Part of the wisdom in God’s distribution of goods to stewards is to take care of those who are wanting. In this way God can be personified in the world. God is the great giver whose heart is united with those in need, those who cannot work, those who are oppressed. Therefore, God loves a cheerful giver.

The Apostle Paul did not merely call upon the Ephesians to put on the new man. He himself modeled what putting on the new man looked like. He was in Miletus, about 50 miles from Ephesus and on his way to Jerusalem for what looked like the end. He summoned the elders of the Ephesus church to come down and meet with him. It was his final charge to them and he directed them to remember how he had ministered when he was among them. He said, “I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. You

yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

This is also the way in which Christ himself came: not to be served but to serve and to give his own life as a ransom for many. Ours is the need, his is the work that he shares with his people.

So we conclude by looking next at . . .

III. The Difference the New Self Makes

Putting on the new self means recognizing the sovereignty of God. Working hard to share with those in need honors God as the merciful giving God that he is. It points to Christ the giver of life by his death. But it also makes a difference to others.

A. First, it makes a difference to those who are in physical need. The most obvious application of this text is that we should be alert and engaged to assist people who have genuine needs. One of the reasons God entrusts us as stewards with more than what we need is so that we can have the joy of blessing those who have less what than they need.

B. Second, putting on the new self makes a difference to those who are in spiritual need. Another obvious application of this text is that we should see our hard, honest work with our own hands as a means to meeting the greatest need in the world and that is the need people for the gospel. No greater need exists in a person's life than hearing and believing the gospel of Jesus Christ. How will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? And how are they to go unless there are those who will support and sustain them who go? Not all are called to go across the world. Some of us need simply to cross the street. But we need to see our calling. We are not here to accumulate but to live in order to give.

C. And there is a third application that looks to the context of Ephesians 4 as a whole. Having explained the gospel in the first three chapters, Paul

turns to apply the teaching to the lives of the believers. He is addressing their works. In chapter 2:10 he has already said we are not saved by good works but for good works. Now he begins to show how important their works are for the unity and strength of the body which is the saints. Notice this in verse 12. In the body the members are equipped for (guess what) the WORKS (same Greek word) of ministry (Ephesians 4:12). And when the members are each doing their part, something wonderful happens. The body grows. Verse 16 says that "when each part is WORKING properly, [it] makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." I suggest to you that the principle of not stealing but WORKING hard with your own hands so that you will be able to share with those in need relates not only to physical and spiritual needs outside the church body but also to the needs within the body. Who in the body is in need? We are all in need. We need each other. We need the proper working of every part.

You know it is a reality that not a few steal from the church probably without realizing it. The theft happens when members are slothful and do not work. And I am not just suggesting that everyone needs to do physical work, although the church working well needs its members to be physically engaged. But I am also saying that we need to work hard in our spiritual lives to be strong in the word and strong in the Spirit, to be strong in encouragement and teaching and ministering in order to give t for the needs of the body, so the church will be unified and the glory of God will be magnified and the Son of God exalted in us. When you work hard at reading and studying the word, it is not just for you. When you toil at prayer it is not only for you. When you mortify sin in your life, it is not only for you. When you just even have to put forth effort to be present when the church gathers, it is not just for you! It is for the body. When you purpose to uplift others with encouragement and admonition, it is not just for you. When you attend a prayer meeting, it is not just for you.

We all receive from the body. We receive instruction. We receive encouragement. We sometimes receive physically and materially, blessings from the body. But our connection to the body is about more than receiving. It is about giving in order that we each may receive according to our need. And as great as is the blessing of receiving, even greater is the

blessing of giving. Remember the words of the Lord Jesus himself, who has said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Conclusion