

Walnuts in the Attic

Ephesians 4:28

A young boy grew up and left his log-cabin home in the mountains. Thirty-five years later, he returned to the old home place. While there, he remembered that as a young boy he had brought a bag of walnuts to the old milk house by the spring. Twenty-five of these walnuts had been planted along the creek bed, and now there stood a row of beautiful walnut trees.

He also remembered that on the same day he had taken what was left of the bag of walnuts into the milk house and had left them in the attic. He wondered if they were still there, and sure enough, under a heavy layer of dust, were the walnuts. Those which had been planted had grown into trees, but the others had long ago become useless (paraphrased from "450 Stores from Life," Leonard Rush Jenkins, compiler. Judson Press, 1947).

On our tour of Ephesians we have come to chapter 4, where Paul has told them that they are to no longer live as the Gentiles do, that their lives as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ should take on new directions, new shape, new meaning. He tells us that when we come to Christ there are certain things that must change. He told us beginning in verse 22, *"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."*

So there are certain things we are to put off, and there are certain things we are to put on. Put off the old self, put on the new self—as you would change from a set of filthy rags into clean, fresh clothes. Beginning in verse 25, Paul gives us some specifics. As we have looked at them we so far have dealt with gossip, forsaking falsehood and to start telling the truth, and dealing with unresolved anger. Today we come to verse 28, where we read,

"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need."

Scripture here tells us three things: it tells us what we should not do—steal; and it tells us what we should be doing instead—work. But most importantly, God's Word tells us what our motivation should be—to share with those in need.

1 We Should Stop Stealing!

Let him who steals steal no more, Paul commands. Theft certainly is one of those things that Christians should never be guilty of. The word Paul used here gives us our English word "kleptomaniac." But this is a present tense word, meaning "The one who is stealing

should stop it—now.” Now why would Paul have to say something like that? He was writing to Christians—do you mean to tell me that these Christians were guilty of stealing? How shameful!

Obviously that’s exactly what Paul is saying. Remember he was writing to Christians in the city of Ephesus. In the city of Ephesus stood the temple to the false god Diana, or Artemis, depending on the translation you have. Any criminal in the area could flee to Ephesus and go to the perimeter of the temple and be safe from prosecution. So you can see what kind of people that would attract. But there’s another fact that needs to be considered here. Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia, and stood at the mouth of the Cayster River. It was a thriving marketplace, and there was much prosperity there. What happens when you put thieves into an area where there is a lot of wealth? More stealing!

Put another piece of the puzzle into place. Many of the new Christians in Ephesus had come from that kind of background. In addition, many of the new Christians were household slaves—in fact, he even addressed some of them in chapter six. It was not unusual at all for household slaves to steal from their masters. Paul took a look at the way they were living, and he said, “Let him who is stealing, stop it!”

Well, we look at that verse, and we think to ourselves, “I’ve never been guilty of that, so this verse doesn’t apply to me.” But that is a lie from Satan. All of God’s Word applies to all of us. You may not be guilty of robbing a bank or embezzling funds from your employer. But this principle goes much deeper than that. Let’s first define the term “stealing,” and to that, we have to think about the biblical concept of *stewardship*.

A steward is a servant who manages someone else's property for the benefit of the owner. The way the Bible teaches it, God owns everything because He created it all. He also owns the Christian and all his or her possessions, not only because God created it to start with, but because He has also redeemed us from death into life. But God has made each of us responsible for a small portion of His property, to manage it for the support of our families and the advancement of His kingdom. Since ownership is then simply another word for responsibility to God as the steward of a designated bit of His property, it follows that any failure to carry out that responsibility properly is stealing, whether I am actively taking it for my own use, or even just neglecting it or mismanaging it.

There are many more forms of stealing than we often acknowledge. Failure to take care of anything God has entrusted to us, failure to develop and use our natural talents and spiritual gifts, failure to tithe, failure to give an honest day's work for a day's pay, failure to give an honest day's pay for a day's work, cheating on a test (or just not studying for it!), wasting time—all these things could be considered forms of stealing. So if we are going to apply this

passage to our lives today, we've got to be honest and say that this is something we must stop—now!

2 We Should Start Working!

Then Paul tells us what we are to be doing instead of stealing. He says that we are to “*work, doing something useful*” with our own hands. The verb translated “work” here means to toil, to labor, to exert oneself, to sweat. This does not mean that a person in an air-conditioned office is not working, but it does imply that work should involve a significant commitment of both effort and time. The point is that the Christian should not have a job just because it is the thing to do or in order to pay his bills. Rather, he should find something that is worthy of striving and dedication and give it his best effort. A Christian should not be a parasite. The focus here is on doing something good.

The teaching of the Bible is that good, honest work is full of dignity and meaning. We need to look back in the early chapters of Genesis, and we will realize that even before Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were expelled from the Garden of Eden, that they had work to do. Genesis 2:15 reads, “*The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*” Work is not a result of the fall of the human race into sin. Work is not part of the curse of sin on the world. In a very important sense, we are obeying one of the original commands God gave the human race when we are engaged in meaningful, daily work.

Understanding that, we are not surprised to find that Scripture strongly condemns idleness. Hear the Word of the Lord: “*How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man*” (Proverbs 6:9-11). Paul was blunt with his words: “*If anyone will not work, let him not eat*” (2 Thess 3.10). Paul also wrote the church at Thessalonica that the way we work has a lot to do with the kind of influence we have on those who are unbelievers: “*Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody*” (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

One thing that is implied by this passage in Ephesians 4 is that the Christian should find something worth doing. Your career is probably going to take more of your time and energy than anything else. If you are just doing it for the money, you will end up hating it and being a slave to it. Seek out something that you love for its own sake, something worth doing even if you did not get paid for it, and give yourself to that. And give it all you've got, in order to please and glorify God.

The best summary of this teaching is the Lord's own words in Mat. 5:16. "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

3 Our Motivation? Share!

When you go to a doctor for your annual check-up, he or she will often begin to poke, prod, and press various places, all the while asking, "Does this hurt? How about this?" If you cry out in pain, one of two things has happened. Either the doctor has pushed too hard, without the right sensitivity. Or, more likely, there's something wrong, and the doctor will say, "We'd better do some more tests. It's not supposed to hurt there!"

So it is when pastors preach on financial responsibility, and certain members cry out in discomfort, criticizing the message and the messenger. Either the pastor has pushed too hard. Or perhaps there's something wrong. In that case, I say, "My friend, we're in need of the Great Physician because it's not supposed to hurt there." (Ben Rogers)

You might look at this verse and say, "Well, I've never been guilty of stealing anything from anyone in my whole life! I've worked hard to get what I have." And I say, "Well, that's good. You're on the right track." But this verse is about far more than just not stealing and having a good job. Put the verse into context. Remember that Paul has been telling us to take off the old man and put on the new. Then he begins to tell us what that would look like when it's translated into our everyday lives. He says that the life of the transformed believer is totally different from the way it was before.

Look back at verse 25. The transformed believer no longer lies, but tells the truth. In verses 26-27, we see that the transformed believer no longer harbors unresolved anger, but deals with it in love. Now in verse 28, Scripture tells us that the transformed believer no longer *takes*, but *gives*. He's not out to *possess*, but to *share*. When God comes into our lives, He changes negatives into positives. Andrew Murray, a South African evangelist and writer, once said, "The world asks, 'What does a man own?' Christ asks, 'How does he use it?'"

So when we look at that aspect of it, we've got to take another look at ourselves. It may be true that we've never robbed a bank or broken into someone else's home. It may be true that we are gainfully employed. But have we stopped there, or have we carried this verse to its conclusion in our lives? In other words, we can stop stealing—or never start; we can start working—or we have been all along. But have we become like the Dead Sea, with water going in, and nothing coming out? Are we really being good stewards of God's money by piling it up? Is that really what God expects of us?

Another way of understanding this passage in a deeper way is to notice how the focus changes as you move through the verse. *The one who steals* is focused on himself, on what he wants,

even if he has to take it or cut corners to get it. *The one who works* is focused on the work itself, on the product. This provides a worthy motive already, to do something that is in itself good. But we move on from that to a *focus on others*. This then is the reason we work: to do something good, to glorify God, to support our families, and to have a surplus that we can share with those in need.

We're talking about being followers of Jesus Christ in such a way that His ways become our ways, including sharing what we have with others. Can we even imagine Jesus hoarding what He had, refusing to share it with someone who might need it? Can we even imagine Jesus being stingy with His possessions? So the reason we should be generous in giving to others is because it mirrors the generosity of our Heavenly Father. And that is the entire goal of all of this. Look at Ephesians 5:1—*“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.”* Take a brief look at what else the Bible has to say about giving.

At a church meeting a very wealthy man rose to tell the rest of those present about his Christian faith. “I’m a millionaire,” he said, “and I attribute it all to the rich blessings of God in my life. I remember the turning point in my faith. I had just earned my first dollar and I went to a church meeting that night. The speaker was a missionary who told about his work. I knew that I only had a dollar bill and had to either give it all to God’s work or nothing at all. So at that moment I decided to give my whole dollar to God. I believe that God blessed that decision, and that is why I am a rich man today.” He finished and there was an awed silence at his testimony as he moved toward his seat. As he sat down a little old lady sitting in the same pew leaned over and said to him: “I dare you to do it again.”

Well, I dare you to do it again—or to do it for the first time. If you’ve been stealing, however large or small the theft has been, the command from Scripture is to stop it—and stop it now! If you are not working, and you are able to work, the command from Scripture is that you should not smooch off others, and if you are working, the principle from Scripture is that you should give it your best. But the entire motivation for all of it is that we should have enough not only to live on, but also to have enough to help others.

There is an old story about the day that Alexander the Great passed a beggar on the side of the road. The beggar had no right to expect anything from Alexander at all. And yet as he went past, Alexander tossed several gold coins in the beggar’s direction. One of the aides was astonished at the generosity and commented, “Sir, copper coins would adequately meet that beggar’s need. Why give him gold?” Alexander responded, “Copper coins would suit the beggar’s need, but gold coins suit Alexander’s giving.”

What suits your giving? Copper or gold? And when will you start?

The Christian then is to be a person who is not a parasite. But he is to be much more. He is also to be a person who is not a slave to things, money, status--which means also that he is not a slave to his job. He works because he is a steward of his time and talents. He thus supports himself, and because he works well and is a good steward and not given to indulgence, he has a surplus to share with those in need. The ideal is not a life of poverty but a life of responsibility. As John Wesley put it, "Make all you can; save all you can; give all you can." This is the lifestyle that brings glory to God and is therefore worthy of our calling: *"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need."*

So I take you back to the story we began with today. The things we share with others are the things that grow and produce an investment in eternity. Are there any dusty, rotten walnuts in *your* attic today?