

Sermon: No Longer Stealing, Rather Working Hard & Sharing Ephesians 4:28

We are continuing our study through Ephesians and we are in that section of the letter that deals with the practical out-workings of what it means to be a new person in Christ.

This morning we are dealing with No Longer Stealing, Rather Working Hard & Sharing.
Cite MLJ and Ray Cortese.
So let's read Ephesians 4:28.

Hear the word of God as written by the Apostle Paul:
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.

Say: *This is God's word.*
The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God stands forever.

Pray.

Our passage from Ephesians divides up nicely into three sections.
This is reflected in the outline and the first point there is...

I. Let the Thief No Longer Steal

Now, of all of the ethical commands in scripture, one of the most self-evident and reasonable commands is that of not stealing.

The 8th commandment is in Exodus 20:15 which says:
Exodus 20:15 "You shall not steal."

So there it is in black and white. Seems clear and straightforward enough.
Do we need any more elucidation? Can't we just move on to the next point?
And well, not so fast.
Because we need to recognize a couple of details about this command.

Paul reiterated the 8th commandment here in Ephesians for a purpose.
Obviously theft was a problem for some in the Ephesian church and this was a result not just of their indwelling sin but also a result of the culture around them.

In almost every culture, theft is a daily reality.
The only question is, how prevalent is it.
The farther a culture or society is from Christ, the more pervasive theft will be.

And the prevalence of theft in a society tells us a great deal about that society and their lack of the knowledge of God.

And this is instructive to us as we consider Paul's command to the Ephesians.
Obviously, there were people in the church who were coming out of a life of theft.
We can assume that previously, their consciences were not troubled by their stealing.
It was normal for them just as it is for many in our society today.

And so as Paul made his way through the Mediterranean world, preaching the gospel and establishing churches, we ought to realize that those who were converted were not simply those coming from fine, upstanding backgrounds.
Quite the contrary, there were many who were coming out of lives of pronounced sin.

We have a snapshot of this in 1 Corinthians 6 verse 9.
Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians 6:9 ...Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, **10** nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. **11** And such were some of you.

The cultures into which the Gospel was originally preached were very obviously sinful.
And this shows us first that the Gospel is for every kind of person.
Both for those who society deems good and for those whom society deems bad.
It's for everyone, regardless of background.
And this is because everyone is a sinner and everyone needs salvation.
And in the church of Ephesus, there were obviously some there who needed to hear this command not to steal- because they were formerly thieves.

In 1 Peter 4: 15, Peter says:
1 Peter 4:15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler.

Peter gave this command because there was the potential for some into the church to fall into these sorts of sins.
Such was the background of many who were converted in the first century.

Throughout the centuries, the church has been filled with people coming out of lives of crime.
Jesus came to save the Zacchaeus types and the Nicodemus types.
Both the thief and the Pharisee
Both need repentance and both need to be converted.

Now theft is an almost universally recognized evil.
It can take the form of stealing someone's money or goods.
But it also takes the form of stealing ideas, stealing time from an employer, manipulating a company expense account, not paying what is owed in taxes, not honoring financial contracts, price gouging, inordinate and luxurious spending on ourselves and our comforts, gambling, wastefulness, idleness and every preoccupation with becoming or remaining rich.

There are many ways that we can break the 8th commandment.

Yet I want us to ask a simple question.
Why do people steal? Why do we steal?
In the rawest form, we steal because we do not love our neighbors.
Rather, we love ourselves and are selfish.
And when we steal, we disrespect and presume upon our neighbor's needs, work and private property.

If and when we steal, we are saying to our neighbor, "your needs, your work, your obligations and your possessions don't matter to me."
You have it, I want it and I'm going to take it."
It is a brute form of selfishness.

And what lies behind such disrespect and presumption is covetousness and an unwillingness to work for what we desire to own.
To steal is to presume upon, disrespect and hate our neighbor.
And the root causes of this are covetousness and an unwillingness to work hard.

Now the objection may come, “yes, but what about the poor. We need to remember the plight of the working poor. Certainly their stealing is somewhat excusable.”
Yet most working poor people do not steal.
Almost all of the working poor people I have ever met hate stealing just as much as people who are not poor.
In my experience, the vast majority of poor people do not steal.
And regardless, just because a person is poor does not excuse their stealing any more than it excuses anyone else’s.

Being a thief is an ethical choice which has more to do with a person’s heart and the culture they are in than it has to do with a person’s financial standing.

This is why so many thieves are of the white collar variety.
There were many guilty parties in the 2008 financial crises and many of them were not poor.

When we steal, we aren’t loving our neighbors.
Because theft is rooted in covetousness.
It’s wanting something for nothing.
It’s wanting the benefits of hard work without doing the hard work.

And this is why personal bankruptcy is often very wrong.
It’s running up a huge debt, and then failing to pay it.
God’s people are to pay their debts.
Remember Cinderella Man. James Braddock. He received welfare assistance from the government and then paid it back when he had the money.

God’s command not to steal also applies to us in the form of the government leaders we elect.
The leaders many of us have elected in the United States deficit spend without conscience on military and social programs.
And as a people, it is wrong to demand a level of government benefits while being unwilling to pay for them through taxes.
As a nation the United States deficit spends year after year- in good times and in bad.
And this practice does not honor God who commands us to avoid debt whenever possible.

So the command is clear.
Do not steal. That may have been what you used to do before you were a Christian.
But now that you are in Christ, you are to steal no longer.

Instead, we are all to work hard and be productive.
And this brings us to our next point:

II. Rather Let Him Work Hard

Paul says:
Ephesians 4:28 Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands...

The word here used for labor is not just a synonym for work. Rather it stands for that type of work that is hard and exhausting.
It is truly labor.
It’s the type of work that leaves you spent.
This week we had to move a large pile of rocks that had been dug out of our yard.
And so we shoveled them into the wheelbarrow and dumped them in another place.
After many hours of doing that in the hot sun, my wife, kids and I were just spent.

Yet this is what all of our work is supposed to do to us.
Our work is meant to exhaust us if we are doing it right.

I know this is true for many of us as we go about our tasks- whether it be professionally in the office or at home, as a student or raising children- our work exhausts and wearies us. And that is the point of what Paul is saying.
The labor he refers to is not simply work.
It is hard, tiring, good, productive work.

Now, why are we commanded to do such hard work 6 days a week?
Is it just because we have to earn a living?
Is it just for survival?

No. The bible tells us that work is a good thing.
In Genesis, God created Adam and Eve in His image and placed them in a garden “to **work** it and keep it”. **Genesis 2:15**

They were to exercise what we call **the creational and cultural mandates**.
To be fruitful and multiply. To rule the earth and subdue it. Even before the fall, there was work to be done.
Children had to be raised and the garden had to be tended and cultivated.

Adam and Eve had a civilization to build.

God’s mandates were that they have children and build culture in the form of all sorts of trades, arts, sciences and institutions. Schools, banks, universities, theaters and concerts, journalism, businesses, information technology, engineering, architecture, athletics, gardening and forestry.
And in this fallen world, medicine and hospitals, legal professions, government and ministry.

Adam and Eve had a civilization to build.
They were to work because they were created in God’s image and God is a worker.

In Genesis 1, with the days of creation, we see God working on 6 days and then resting on the seventh.
In Genesis 2, we see God with his hands in the dirt, forming Adam.
God is a worker and he calls us to work as well.

So, work is good and it was an essential part of our lives even before the fall.
But then after the fall, the work changed.
It got harder.
For Eve, the punishment was that she would have pain in bearing children.
This is the reason even today, we call the process of bearing children...LABOR.

In Genesis 3:16 God says:
Genesis 3:16 “I will surely multiply your **pain** in childbearing; in **pain** you shall bring forth children.

That word there for pain is the same word used in verse 17 to describe the difficulty of Adam’s work.

17 And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in **pain** you shall eat of it all the days of your life; **18** thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. **19** By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

As a result of the fall, our work has become much harder.

Both the labor of bearing and raising children and also the labor of producing food, clothing and shelter has become harder after the fall.

And so today, we experience both the blessings and cursings of work.

Sometimes our work is the most satisfying and enjoyable thing we could think to do.

Yet at other times, it is toilsome and tedious.

Figuratively speaking, sometimes we prepare the field and plant the seed, just to see the locusts swarm in and destroy the crop. Or sometimes there are droughts, or robbers or wars- and the work bears little fruit.

Yet God has called us to work because through our work we image God, we build family, culture and civilization.

And our work is the primary way in which we are to love our neighbor.

I'll say that again: our work is the primary way in which we are to love our neighbor.

Our cultures easily fall into wrong views of work.

On the one hand, there are those who work only so they can take their leisure or live luxuriously.

One of the ideals of life in the western world is this unbiblical thing called "retirement."

In the Bible, there is no concept of retirement- of spending the last 20 years of your life on an extended vacation.

And so, when we get older, we may quit serving God professionally in the way we once did.

But that does not mean that we are no longer to work.

There will always be much for us to do in the way of building family, culture and civilization.

Another error is to work only so much that we might have enough to survive.

This is not God's ideal because, then we would not have the means to be generous.

And plus, it misses the point that our work is our primary means of loving our neighbor.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the error of working in order to establish our identity.

And in this case, we over-work or we work for the wrong reasons- so that people might esteem us or so that we might become rich and respected.

Yet if we view our work as the primary way in which we are to love our neighbor, then the motivation behind our work will be transformed.

Our energy for work will be renewed.

Just think about it: whatever skills you have or desire to have- as you work, those skills will become refined and sharpened.

By experience, we become more effective, wiser, more efficient in our work.

We can offer better products and services at lower prices because we just become good at what we do.

Whether it's farming or construction, IT or intel, production or retail, education or auto repairs- as we give ourselves to our work, we get better at what we do.

And over time, we are more able to serve our neighbors in a way that few others can.

This is what God calls us to.

In the end, it's not about money. It's about loving our neighbors.

So let me ask you: How do you view your work?

What is the motivation behind your work?

Are you doing it just to survive or just to become financially independent?

Do you work to establish your reputation and self-worth?

Paul writes in Colossians 3:23

Colossians 3:23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, **24** knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Our work is an act of service to Christ and it is the primary way that we show love to our neighbors.

I heard the story this week of a woman who, when she entered into college, all she really wanted to do was become an elementary school teacher.

But then she thought about her 10 year class reunion, she changed her mind and decided to study law because she thought it would better establish her reputation with her peers.

How many people have chosen jobs, not because it was the occupation they most wanted to do or what they were most gifted for- but because it helped establish their self-worth and their reputation in other's minds.

And how many people have gone into ministry or chosen to work in non-profits because they think that there they can truly serve humanity.

When what our culture really needs are more skilled mechanics, carpenters, plumbers and engineers.

Colossians 3:23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, **24** knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Our daily work is the primary way we are to love Christ and serve our neighbors.

In 1 Timothy 4:15, Paul advises Timothy on how he is to do the work of ministry.

He writes:

1 Timothy 4:14 Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. **15** Practice these things, **immerse yourself in them**, so that all may see your progress.

In ministry, the pastor is to immerse himself in his work.

And this is not true just for pastors.

This is true for all of us.

We all have been called to work and this means immersing ourselves in our tasks to be as productive, as fruitful and as effective as possible.

Now, I believe it is clear that we are not to lose ourselves in our work or become identified solely by our work.

There is an idolatry about work that is unhealthy and many have fallen into it.

Yet if we keep in mind that our work is primarily about service to Christ and to our neighbor, we will not go astray.

We won't neglect our relationships, families or become arrogant.

I want you to hear about Paul's example of work with the Ephesians:

Acts 20:33 I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. **34** You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. **35** 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.'"

Our work is our primary form of service to Christ, and love to others.

And when we work hard and are wise with our money, we will invariably have an abundance to share.

And this leads us to our final point:

III. Share With Those in Need

In Ephesians 4:28, Paul commands us all to work hard so that we might be productive and have something to share with anyone in need.

The good things that we produce with our work are the primary ways that we bless our neighbors and those who are in need.

Yet the secondary way we can bless those in need comes in the form of generous and charitable giving.

Proverbs 10:4 says:

Proverbs 10:4 A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

And this Proverb has proven itself to be true through the centuries.

When we are diligent in our work and wise with our finances and in our life in general, we will have wealth to share.

Now I want to share with you two scriptures that point to our obligation to give.

One is from the Old Testament and the other from the New.

The Old Testament passage comes from Leviticus 19:9-11 which says:

Leviticus 19:9 "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. **10** And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

In the Old Testament, the people of God were expressly prohibited from harvesting their fields up to the edge. Rather they were to leave the edges of their fields for the poor to glean.

And the same was true for what fell on the ground.

Now, in applying this verse to ourselves, few if any of us farm for a living.

Yet we are not to spend our paychecks up to the edge so that we have little or nothing to give.

And this giving does not include the tithe.

The farmer still had to tithe on their harvest and so should we. Yet our financial lives should be structured in such a way that we always have something to give.

If we find ourselves, month after month, year after year, having little or nothing to give away to those in need, we most likely need to adjust how we are living and our financial obligations.

The second scripture that pertains to giving is from Romans 13:8.

Romans 13:8 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

You may be living debt free.

You may owe no money on your house, your education or your car.

But this does not mean that you are out of debt.

Because all of us in Christ are indebted to one another to show love.

We owe our neighbors a debt of love.

And this debt of love that we have to pay begins in our families and extends to the church and it extends to our neighbors in our community and finally it extends to the world.

And so we are all in debt.

If a person needs a listening ear, we give a listening ear.

If a person needs a friend, we become a friend.

If the person needs financial assistance, we provide it liberally.

If a person needs a voice, we give them a platform or speak up for them.

And when we give these services- these forms of love, they are not charity.

These are not instances of us being benevolent.

We are just paying our debts.

Our example in this is the Lord Jesus Christ

Philippians 2:6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7** but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Christ humbled himself because he chose to incur debt, or obligate himself to us and to the father.

Jesus gave up his wealth. He became poor so that we would become rich.

2 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.

Jesus' act of becoming poor made his life hard.

He worked hard. Never has a man worked as diligently or as skillfully as he did.

Luke 6:12-17 tells us that Jesus spent all night in prayer and then the next morning, he preached to the multitudes.

Jesus' life was filled with hard work.

And it was skillful work for he was the only one with the capacity or know how who could do it.

And he did this work so that he could share with us.

He shared with us his eternal life, his family name, and his heavenly glory.

And because our Savior lived this way, he calls all of us to live as he lived.

Our calling is to no longer steal, but rather to work hard, to be productive and to share.

In this way we will resemble our savior who worked hard for us and shared with us the benefits of his labor.

Amen.