

## The 8<sup>th</sup> Command: From Taker to Giver

### Ephesians 4:20-24

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Steve DeWitt

Last summer I was speaking at a camp in Georgia when one of our dear senior saints Betty Bellamy was very sick in the hospital. She had cancer and was struggling. Now Betty was one of those go-to types around here. If there was a funeral luncheon suddenly needed, she would organize things and make it happen. Her career was as a music teacher, leading choirs and so forth. If you can get 16-year-old boys to sing on key you can organize people to do lots of things. Betty was faithful to church and really used her last years to serve here and it was her delight. I found out things were not going well so I called Pastor Gary and made arrangements so I could talk with her by phone. I was sitting on a bench in Georgia with my Bible open when I called and Gary stepped out of Betty's hospital room. I said, "How is she?"

He said, "She seems to be doing okay."

I said, "I'm ready to read some Scripture with her—"

And he suddenly said, "Oh my, she just died."

Just that quick Betty stepped into heaven. Even after her death, Betty continued to give. A few months later we were contacted by her estate and they said, "Betty had Bethel in her will and we will be sending you a check." And they did so and it was a touching amount. Betty's Christianity included even her will. And this is a good question for all of us—do we have a will and is it a Christian one?

I knew Betty as her pastor for 16 years. She was an unassuming, quiet server in the church but Betty was a giver. She gave her time. She gave her gifts. She gave her heart with her concern for others. And even after her death, she gave to God. If you ask me, *was Betty a giver or a taker?* the answer is obvious to me. But how did she become a giving person? Was she born this way? Where we are going here is that the miracle of regeneration by faith in a giving Savior turns basically self-oriented "takers" into self-sacrificing "givers."

Our series on the Ten Commandments is sitting on the eighth command. Exodus 20:15 says, *"You shall not steal."* We studied the verse itself last week. Taking what's not ours is always sin because God is the Eternal Giver. The essence of who God is self-giving. We experience this primarily through Jesus giving his life for us on the cross. He was ironically crucified between two thieves. There were three crosses. Two thieves. One Giver. One thief on the cross realized this. The other did not. The one thief hurled insults at Jesus and demanded he do a miracle and save them. He was self-oriented to the very end. The other thief turned in faith to Jesus and Jesus assured him of eternal salvation for him in Paradise.

Imagine after Jesus says this, but before these two thieves die, that they are suddenly exonerated of their crimes and released. The soldiers take them down. Their wounds heal. What kind of life would we expect going forward? The unrepentant thief would likely return to his old ways. His nature was selfish. His nature was to be a taker. But the other? Would the experience of Jesus' forgiveness of his sins change him? In what way? Is a thief always a thief or does Jesus change thieves?

*"But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the*

*spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4:20-24 ESV)*

There is an old self and, in Christ, a new self. The old self is pre-Christian. The natural, sinful man. The new self is post-conversion. It is new life by the Spirit in us. We retain the old nature but are empowered to live by the new nature. How do we do this? We are told to put off the old and put on the new. Put off means to kill, to set aside; basically, don't live by the old self's desires. We are told to put on the new self through the renewing of our minds by truth and walking according to the desires of my new identity in Jesus.

Everyone wants to know what that looks like practically. Paul gets practical. In verse 25 he says, put off **falsehood** and put on truthfulness. In verse 26 he tells us to put off **anger** and put on quick conflict resolution and forgiveness. Verse 29 says, put off corrupt and divisive **talk** and put on words that build one another up. Verse 28 is our focus: *“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.”* (Ephesians 4:28)

The Greek word for thief is *klepto*. We get kleptomaniac from it. This is a person who uses their hands to take what is not theirs. As we saw last week, stealing comes in many forms, not just of the sticky finger type. Kidnapping. Fraud of any kind. Misrepresentation. Tax evasion. Idleness at work. Squandering what God has given us. Copying what isn't ours. As Luther defined it, “Taking advantage of our neighbor in any sort of dealing that results in loss to him.” (Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, p. 39)

This is the stealing we are to “put off.” How do we do this? The goal of the eighth command is not simply the absence of sticky fingers but the presence of two spiritual qualities.

### **Transformed Hands: Work as God's Ordained Means to Meet our Physical Needs**

*“...but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands.”* (Ephesians 4:28)

We talked about the sanctity of work in the fourth command. *“Six days you shall labor.”* (Exodus 20:9) Human labor to meet our physical needs is inherently good. God worked six days and rested on the seventh. This is inherently good and in the plan of God is the means by which our needs are met. Laziness is condemned throughout Scripture and Paul goes so far to say that if a man doesn't work, the church shouldn't give him food (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Paul isn't talking here about those who have recently lost their jobs or those who have a disability that prevents them from working. But he makes it clear there should be no freeloaders in the church. No one should feel entitled to simply live off the handouts of others. We are to do legitimate work and receive rightful wages for that labor.

Stealing is a distortion of God's plan. It is a get rich quick and easy plan. *Our* hands are to meet our needs. Stealing is using my hands improperly. Further, it denies others their right to the labor of their hands. It is to get ahead at others' expense. I am failing to love my neighbor as myself.

That inclination to get ahead without working for it is part of the old sinful self. I feel the need to speak to one example of this because it so pervasive, especially in Northwest Indiana—gambling. How does the eighth command apply to gambling? What heart desires motivate me when I buy the lotto ticket or pull the slot machine arm? Are those holy or are they seeking a shortcut for personal gain? What happens if I win? What am I winning? I am receiving money at the loss of others who have foolishly wasted their money pursuing the same gain.

“While the Bible contains no “thou shalt not” in regard to gambling, it does contain many insights and principles which indicate that gambling is wrong. The Bible emphasizes the sovereignty of God in the direction of human events (Matt. 10:29-30); gambling looks to chance and good luck. The Bible indicates that man is to work creatively and use his possessions for the good of others (Eph. 4:28); gambling fosters a something-for-nothing attitude. The Bible calls for careful stewardship; gambling calls for reckless abandon. The Bible condemns covetousness and materialism (Matt. 6:24-34); gambling has both at its heart. The moral thrust of the Bible is love for God and neighbor (Matt. 22:37-40); gambling seeks personal gain and pleasure at another person’s loss and pain.” (Southern Baptist Convention, “Issues & Answers: Gambling,” March 21, 2006, www.erc.org)

Rather than gambling, Ponzi schemes, or get-rich-quick plans, the Bible exhorts us to work for what we gain. This is the legitimate use of our hands, gifts, time, and talents.

So when is a thief no longer a thief? The first step is when he works for what he has. There is dignity to an honest day’s work and the satisfaction of an honest day’s pay. But it doesn’t stop there. “*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.*” (Ephesians 4:28) The full answer to when is a thief no longer a thief is when they become a giver. Now the transformation is complete. Why?

### **Transformed Heart: Generous Giving to Meet Others’ Physical and Eternal Needs**

Transformation doesn’t happen when the thief stops stealing; transformation happens when the thief becomes generous. There are many people with the same greed as anyone in the Lake County Jail, but they try to satisfy it legally. Rather than being greedy thieves they are greedy watchmakers, shoemakers, and clockmakers. They don’t go to jail and they may prosper greatly. Yet is that what God is looking to do in us? Make us rich? For what? So that we can be non-stealing hard working materialists? No. Remember that God’s goal is to conform us to the likeness of his Son (Romans 8:29). The Spirit’s goal is to break us from our love of this world and our desire to find meaning in the accumulation of things (materialism) and to transform us into generous givers like Jesus.

Since preaching is one of the means by which God changes us, faithful preachers must talk about the motives behind our materialism or they are not faithful preachers.

“When people ask us what the difference is, we simply respond that Christians give. I think many times what happens is that we teach stinginess by default. We are so afraid to talk about money and touch on issues of giving that we’ve taught people they can be deeply spiritual and not be generous. In many ways we have communicated that how we deal with money is irrelevant to our spiritual lives.” (Erwin McManus, *Unstoppable Force*, p. 220.)

McManus is touching on something is plainly true. Our perspective and practice with money and possessions shows the true spiritual condition of our hearts. This can be positively displayed in our personal freedom to give what we have to God and others, or negatively as our stinginess reveals a spiritual emptiness and someone who really doesn’t get the gospel. Either way, money reveals character.

Paul is not saying, “Thieves, quit stealing, give to others, and go to heaven.” The thief on the cross didn’t do any of those, yet is in heaven. Salvation is by faith alone. This is the flaw in the famous *Les Miserables*. Jean Valjean seeks redemption for his past life as a thief by

showing kindness to the orphaned daughter of a former employee. The musical implies that this saves you, but to be saved you have to sing all your words. My wife loves it so I'll stop further critique.

There will be many honest businessmen who gave philanthropically who end up in hell. The rich young ruler in Mark 10 is an example of an apparently honest rich dude who was very moral but unsaved. True gospel transformation of the thief or materialist is when he works for what he has and gives generously for Jesus' sake. It is gospel motivated. It's not giving to change public policy or lobby congress or get my name on the building. It is motivated by love and a wonder for all that God has given me freely in Jesus.

A positive example of this would be Zacchaeus. He was an example of someone making a fortune legally but unethically. He was the senior executive for the Roman IRS. It was within his right to overcharge or extort; the Romans didn't care as long as they got their taxes. Tax collectors were so famously corrupt that to be a tax collector was viewed as being the worst sinner in town. Zacchaeus was very rich and very short. If you know the story, he met Jesus. Jesus went to his house. The effect of Jesus' teaching and presence on Zacchaeus was so radical that he says,

*"Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:8-10)*

Tax collectors were takers; perhaps the most notorious takers in history. Zacchaeus went from an unethical taker to a generous giver. You could read this very wrongly. He paid restitution, therefore he is saved. No. The whole Bible insists that salvation cannot be earned, bought, or merited by anything we do. Yet what occurred in Zacchaeus' heart? The presence of Jesus changed his heart and with that change of heart came generosity of spirit and money.

That is what Paul is emphasizing. Thieves and materialists can be saved by Jesus. He changes their hearts, and with that heart change comes another change. ***They orient away from taking from others and turn toward giving to others.***

*"Three attitudes we can take toward possessions. The first says, What's yours is mine; I'll take it. That is the attitude of the thief. The second says, What's mine is mine; I'll keep it." Since we are selfish by nature, this is the attitude that most people have most of the time. The third attitude – the godly attitude says, What's mine is God's; I'll share it." (Jerry Bridges as quoted by Philip Graham Ryken, *Written in Stone*, p. 176)*

Take a moment and think of the most generous Christian you know. I'll guess you don't know much about their money or how they handle it, but you do see something special in them. There is a magnanimous spirit about them. They welcome you into their lives. They are hospitable with their attention. You sense they care about you. They listen. They ask about your life, hurts, and challenges. They are likely this way because they don't view their things or time as ultimately theirs. These are gifts from God for them to steward. If you were to look behind the scenes of their finances, you would find quiet but faithful, generous giving to God and to others. They are likely hard workers and great employees. They are wise with what God provides to them. They don't waste much. They can't. They don't view it as theirs in the first place. This allows them to feel free to give away to meet other peoples'

temporal needs. Their greatest joy is to use and give what they have to address peoples' eternal needs.



Have you ever had a close-up on someone like this? I have. Fifteen years ago I was blessed to begin a friendship with Dr. Wilbur Williams (see picture below). For over 45 years he has been Professor of Old Testament at Indiana Wesleyan University. He is an archaeologist and has led over 150 tours of Israel. I have done five or so of them with him myself. Wilbur is in his 80s. He has taught over 17,000 students and continues a full teaching load to this day. He has taken a salary each year from IWU of \$1. He takes no salary for the Israel trips and has personally paid for legions of students to tour

Israel. He has won professor of the year at IWU so many times they might as well just permanently mount the trophy in his office.

These are all things that you can read online. I have been blessed to know him personally. I don't know why he likes me but for some reason he does. In my single years, I would write him a question and he would answer at length with godly advice about dating and women and marriage. He has 500 students a year and yet he would write to this lonely, single pastor. Here's an example of his generosity: a few years ago we put together a "Steps of Paul" trip. We advertised it but there were some issues with the trip. I don't remember all the details. But the short of it is, he led the tour for us without compensation, he personally paid for his wife to go, and told me the only reason he did this two-week tour was because he loved me.

When Jennifer and I got married, he spoke at our wedding and then jumped into a car and drove eight hours to a banquet held in his honor. He had this crazy day because he didn't want to miss our wedding. I could go on and on. One I have to mention is his kindness to his wife Ardelia. Ardelia suffers from Alzheimer's. I have watched the incredible patience of Dr. Williams caring for her. He has told me, "I never want her to feel bad about forgetting anything." That's something a new husband can learn from.

Few, if any in my life, have more modeled generosity to me than Dr. Williams. But if you were to ask him about it, he would deflect praise. He would talk about the Lord's goodness. Thousands of students and pastors and an entire university hold him in the highest regard. He has lived the generous life. I would trust him with every penny I have. He is not a taker. He is a giver and he is blessed. As Jesus said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*" (Acts 20:35)

I used to talk and joke publicly about being Dutch and lightheartedly embrace the stereotype of Dutch stinginess. A few years ago I purposed not to do that anymore. I don't want to be known by perception or reality as being cheap. I want my life to be generous. Generous like Dr. Williams. And even more, generous like my Savior Jesus...

*“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8)*

This gospel that we love and treasure is generosity toward us, and working through us, that gospel will be generous toward others.

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