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HONESTY IN DEALING WITH THE PROPERTY OF OTHERS

Exodus 20:15 - "You shall not steal."

Ephesians 4:22-28 - "...to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, [23] and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, [24] and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. [25] Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. [26] Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, [27] and give no opportunity to the devil. [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."

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 - "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? 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. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

There is a sense in which all of these commands rest upon the foundation of God as the creator of all that is in this world. The reason we kill some animals or plants for food, but don't kill one another, is *man's life is sacred in a way no other life is. Man is made in God's image.*

In the same way, the reason we don't steal from one another, is we treat each other's rights with regard to property, as befitting creatures of a common Creator. Because I respect you, as a fellow creature made in God's image, I respect your property. *I don't violate God's creation by stealing your goods.*

From all of this, it is easy to see how, removing God from the picture, man no longer has any intelligent moral base for keeping the kind of standards of morality around that would make for a better and safer society. In short, *you have to lock your doors at night because mankind has forgotten about God.* God is the fountain of all other goodness. Take the *vertical* relationship with God away, and the *horizontal* relationship with man won't perform well for long.

1) THE COMMANDMENT ABOUT STEALING WAS ONE OF THE FIRST POINTS OF BEHAVIOR PAUL APPLIED TO NEW CHRISTIANS IN THE CHURCH

That alone ought to arrest our attention. Paul didn't feel this was an archaic bit of legalism that had no application to new testament believers. There are two kingdoms - one of *light* and one of *sin and darkness*. Each has its own style of operation. The chief mark of the kingdom of God, that *by which it could be identified in its members*, is love one for another - "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another."

Then there is the kingdom of *darkness*. Satan rules there. And his style comes to mark all who reject Jesus Christ. Listen to what Jesus specifically calls the devil in John 10:10 - "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

Take note of the very first tell-tale sign of the Devil in Jesus' words. "The thief" comes to do all these things. Satan steals. Satan kills. And Satan destroys. But what *marks him* - what *names him* is the fact that he's a *thief*. And if Satan is a thief, I am *most* like him and *least* like God when I steal or swindle.

It's with this theological understanding that Paul outlines his instructions for new converts to Christ: Ephesians 4:22-28 - "...to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, [23] and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, [24] and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. [25] Therefore,

having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. [26] Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, [27] and give no opportunity to the devil. [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."

When Paul first begins with new converts, he touches on three specific points of behavior. He says *three things* must be deleted from the life instantly upon coming to Jesus - *lying (falsehood)(25), anger(26) and stealing(28)*.

Paul's approach wouldn't be very popular in today's church. Paul uses lists. And we *hate* lists. We've been duped into thinking lists are only for legalists. People want something a little more tolerant sounding, a little more gracious than what Paul has to say.

I can just imagine the whole scene as a new convert comes to Paul:

"Paul, I just love Jesus so much. I want to live every moment in His presence. I want to *feel* His Presence moving in my heart. I want to know Him so much. I just want to praise Him and love Him to death. How can I move into that inner place? How can I just turn my whole life into an instrument of worship? I want to "feel His embrace", like the worship choruses say. What's the secret?"

"OK. Here's what you do. Stop lying. Learn to always control your temper - even when you're wronged by others. And don't steal. Get a job. Learn to be generous with those you meet who have a need. Spend less on yourself so you can share more with them."

"I know Paul. But, you don't understand. I really want to go deep with Jesus. I write poems in the shower. I want to learn to interpret dreams for all my friends. I mean, I want the deeper stuff. What should I do to get there?"

"Ok. Stop all lying. Only tell the truth. Work very hard on keeping a calm attitude, especially when you've been mistreated. Never cheat or steal. Work hard so you can give more to the work of God and use less for yourself."

Why does Paul start out with this kind of instruction? Because, whatever else the Christian life is, and whatever else it may become in time, Paul wants people like you and me to understand that it *always starts with*, and is *never less than* a total turning away from the patterns of the enemy and his kingdom.

The new life isn't *a mystical life*. It's *a pure life*. It transforms whomever it touches and takes away the persistence in sin and gives a heart of holiness and purity of character. And that's what it does *first*. That's the Holy Spirit's *chief* work. Paul doesn't want anybody thinking they can *take salvation* and *keep a dirty life*. When grace comes, the sin must go.

2) SOME BASIC TEACHING ON HOW THE HOLY SPIRIT MAKES BAD PEOPLE GOOD

But there's something else, even more important, in these verses. They contain, in a nutshell, what is the *theology of holiness* of the New Testament that desperately needs re-teaching in today's church.

Let me start with this background before we look at the specific command about stealing. I know we just read these verses, but look carefully once again at Paul's instructions:

Ephesians 4:22-28 - “....to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, [23] and to be *renewed in the spirit of your minds*, [24] and to *put on the new self*, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. [25] Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you *speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another*. [26] Be angry and do not sin; *do not let the sun go down on your anger*, [27] and *give no opportunity to the devil*. [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.*”

Now here’s my question. Why doesn’t Paul say something about *prayer*, or something about *Bible study* in all of those instructions about holiness? Why does he make it all sound so mechanical and almost work-like? Certainly Paul knows about the reality and necessity of the power of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life. Paul teaches about that *more* than any writer in the New Testament:

Romans 8:2 - “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”

Romans 8:9-11 - “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. [10] But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. [11] If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”

Galatians 5:16 - “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

No doubt about it, Paul understood fully the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the Christian. Paul believed it. And Paul taught it. But the real question here is, *how does this spiritual process of sanctification start in the Christian’s life?* What triggers it? What gets it all going?

And the whole New Testament teaches the same truth at this point. *What triggers the power of the Holy Spirit in the purifying of a life is the believer’s decision - the believer’s decision to renounce the sin revealed in the heart.*

And already I can imagine the objections to that statement. **No** - the believer doesn’t have the power to clean up his or her own life. **No** - the Bible doesn’t teach a works kind of righteousness where we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

But what the Bible *does* teach is that *nothing* of a life of holiness will be developed *until the believer makes his or her resolute decision to be rid of sin in the heart*. And nothing of the Holy Spirit’s work will renew the mind of any sinner *until he or she quits playing the blame game*. Life may be unfair and people may have let you down. But as long as you are playing all those excuses in your mind you’re shutting God out of your future.

In fact, to my knowledge, there is not one case in the New Testament where Christians are told to *pray about some sinful practice in their lives*. There is not a single case where a believer is told to *fast* about some revealed sin in his or her heart.

It's not that the Holy Spirit is ignored. It's simply recognized and assumed that, because He's the **Holy** Spirit, He is there to promote holiness for the glory of God. He's ready to work. He doesn't have to be begged or coaxed. He only awaits our commitment, exercised in faith and humility and honesty to be rid of the sin in question.

I'll tell you what I believe with all my heart. If what I want to have settled in my life is an issue of **the removal of sin and its bondage**, the Bible says that the power of the risen Christ is there to enable that deliverance. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit is greater than any other power in me.

One more thing. The Bible says that God will not call me to anything He will not enable me to do:

1 Thessalonians 5:22-24 - "...Abstain from every form of evil. [23] Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. [24] He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."

My part is to understand God's **desire** for holiness of life. Then, the Bible says I am to recognize God's **provision** for holy living. And finally, the Word says, **"Don, right now, you stop that." And I can stop it.**

And I may well stumble and fail. God has grace for that. But there is no grace for **willfully abiding in sin**. My will has to be **set against** sin. It's that setting of the will **in line** with God's Word and promise that **welcomes the help of the Holy Spirit**.

And friend, if you have actually become convinced, either by your own heart, or by the teaching of a host of salespeople in Christ's church, that you need all sorts of tapes and seminars and books and special methods and dramatic experiences before you can overcome your sin, **then you're digging a hole for yourself that you'll never climb out of.**

Please understand, I'm **not** talking now about **medical problems** that are of a different order than **moral disobedience**. And I'm not talking about valid **psychological problems** (notice, I said **valid** psychological problems) that need some professional counsel.

Certainly there **are** areas where God has given special helps and ministries for unique needs. But I'm talking about **holiness issues**. And by far, most of our problems and **spiritual and moral**. God, in His grace, has made the solution **far more simple** than most Christians have been led to believe in the modern church.

If you've lived a life of **deceit and dishonesty**, when you come to Christ, you **renounce and forsake that behavior**. And you can. If you've lived a life of **sexual immorality and licence**, when you come to Christ, you **renounce and forsake that behavior**. And you can. If you've lived a life **dominated by fits of rage and temper**, and you come to Christ, you **renounce and forsake that behavior**. And you can.

But first, there are two monumental steps that every searching Christian must take. **You must believe that Jesus can make you clean and free. And you must decide to renounce the sin revealed by the Holy Spirit.** Remember, God will **work** as you **commit**.

More on this command next week.