

Other People's Property

Exodus 22:1-15

God created us to love Him with everything all the time--all of our heart, soul, mind and strength—which means that it's possible to do so. What does loving God have to do with property? If you think about the amount of time you spend earning, purchasing, maintaining, giving, loaning, and borrowing things, it becomes apparent. "Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10). Property are humans rights, and therefore you can't love God and rip-off your neighbor.

NOTES:

Theft & Restitution

Like the previous verses defining and sentencing murder, this passage provides wisdom for understanding and addressing theft, the violation of the eighth commandment. If a man steals an ox or sheep, slaughters or sells it, he owes five oxen or four sheep (v1). If someone steals your five dollars, you are out the five. But if you're a farmer and someone cuts down your cultivated apple tree, replacing it with a sapling is not equal restitution. An ox is trained to plow and pull, and a sheep is productive. These animals are *capital*, a productive form of wealth. If you steal a plumber's van with all of his tools and parts, you're taking more than a list of items. The law requires fitting restitution that takes property and time into account so the victim is appropriately compensated (*lex talionis*). In the biblical system justice is for the victim. If the criminal is arrested and thrown in jail without having to pay, the victim is penalized again, paying taxes for room and board. If a thief breaks in at night and is killed, there's no guilt for his death (v2). But if it's in daylight and he does not present mortal danger, there is guilt if he is killed (v3). This is a question of necessary force because criminals also bear the image of God. If caught, one must make full restitution, and if unable, he would be sold as a slave—made to work—until he pays his debt. We still take away freedom from people, but it's largely counterproductive. If a thief is caught and still possesses the animal, he owes double, which compensates the owner for his trouble and lost time, and discourages stealing; he loses what he hoped to gain. Other stolen items required paying the value of the item plus 20% (Lev. 6:5). These laws are not meant to address every specific situation, but the principles apply—to goats, to tools, to all of life. This is what case or common law does, establishing a judicial precedent and principle.

Liability

Thieves steal intentionally, but that's not the only way to defraud a neighbor. If a man's animal gets out of his field and eats from his neighbor's, he has to make restitution from the best of his field or vineyard (v5). Here the amount of crop is equal, but the quality has to be as high as possible. The golden rule shines: what you would want others to do for you if you were in their situation, do for them. If a farmer's field or brush fire breaks out and burns his neighbor's field, he must make restitution (v6). These are issues of carelessness, and sometimes just hard providence. Sometimes the wind comes from nowhere and blows fire the wrong direction, and no man controls the wind. But if you set a fire, you're responsible for where it goes and liable for the damages. Things are going to happen that we do not intend, and God wants us to be wise and the kind of people who are happy to make it right when we need to. You can't be a generous person if you are not first a faithful person to your obligations.

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Borrowing & Lending

Before big banks there were small banks in homes. If someone stores money or goods with someone and a thief steals and is caught, he owes double (v7). But if the money or goods are not found, the judges would hear the case and decide if the keeper is guilty (vv8-9). Israel established a judicial system where both parties would testify, meaning the accused would speak and be allowed to cross-examine. Biblical justice requires two or three witnesses (Deut. 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1), and judges who are competent, God-fearing, men of truth, and hate covetousness (Ex. 21:8). We ought to remember these standards before coming to conclusions about what we hear (cf. Prov. 18:17). When something inexplicable happens either in the death or disappearance of an animal, each party would take an oath before the Lord (vv10-11). This is where the party under suspicion swears to God they're telling the truth, and may He strike them down if not. If the person trusted to keep it steals an item, he owes restitution, but if it's inadvertently destroyed and he can prove it, he doesn't owe (vv12-13). Lastly, about your friend's lawn mower, if you borrow and break it, you owe him (v14). If he is there with you, then you don't. And if you rent it from him, then the price takes into the account the fact that it will one day break so you don't owe (v15). These situations are clear and necessary for loving your neighbor: good fences make good neighbors. If you want to do honest and thriving business, *write it down* and do what you say you are going to do.

Nothing But the Debt of Love

Restitution and forgiveness go hand in hand. In the law, on the day you realized that you lied, stole, or defrauded, you would make restitution and take your trespass offering to the priest: "he shall be forgiven for any one of these things that he may have done in which he trespasses" (Lev. 6:7). Notice the tense: "he *shall be* forgiven." Today you don't take an offering to a priest because Jesus Christ is your high priest who has already offered Himself on the cross for your sin. You go to Him *and* the person you wronged. If you can't pay, make arrangements. Being forgiven does not give you the right to keep stolen merchandise, default on your debt, or rob your neighbor. Paul says to owe no one anything except the debt of love (Rom. 13:8). In the situation where you can't find the person or business you stole from, give it to the Lord (Num. 5:8). Christians will wonder if you haven't or won't make restitution, will God still forgive you? Ask it another way. If I steal \$10,000 from you and won't make it right, are we in fellowship? We can't lose our salvation, but we can lose the joy of it (Ps. 51:12). Because of unconfessed and unrepented sin some Christians have forgotten what that joy is like altogether. Zacchaeus built a miserable fortune as head tax collector in Jericho, and people couldn't believe it when Jesus invited Himself over to his house. He mentions Exodus 22:1 to Jesus: "'Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost'" (Lk. 19:8-10). Make it right and live free.