

## EPHESIANS #67 4:28 4-28-13

### *GIVE OR TAKE*

(Ephesians 4) I had a basketball coach in high school named Bobby James who used to say some things that I didn't understand back then. For instance, he used to have us stack our hands before a game and repeat after him. Believe it or not, what he said went like this, and we'd repeat it phrase by phrase: *All America, Mother Jesus, if we cease to stumble, help us long the way. If we fall on our face, we shall not rise. All for one. And one for all.* I liked this coach, but I have no idea. Another thing he would say to us was that a champion never gets beat on his worst day, he always gets beat on his best day. I would hear him say that and I'd think, "Wow, that's heavy. I don't get it yet, but I figure I will when I get older." Well, I'm older now and I still don't get it - even though I think I'm a bit sharper than I was. My pastor in my college church used to say something very often that I didn't appreciate at the time, but have really come to understand. He said, "Spirituality is morality." ® I didn't see his point then, but after some years of pastoral ministry I came to understand why he made such a big deal of that point. You see, a lot of people want to evaluate their spiritual life by how ooey, gooey they feel in church, or something like that. They consider themselves very religious, very spiritual - only one problem - that spirituality doesn't express itself in ethical behavior. But according to the Bible, that is the proof of the pudding. Real spirituality leads to real morality, to obedience in the nuts and bolts of real life. I say that to introduce our study for today which comes from a section of Ephesians full of moral directives for the Christian. Here is the third of those directives **28** *He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.* Again we see the formula of forbidding one thing and encouraging the opposite. That which is forbidden here is stealing. What is stealing, kids? Anybody can tell me that stealing is taking something that belongs to someone else. And if you think about it you see that the prohibition against stealing is rooted in an important and pervasive biblical principle, which is the principle of the right to private property. Commandment #8 of the big ten says *Thou shalt not steal* and it assumes, as does all of biblical ethics, the ownership of earthly possessions by individuals. The notion that God is the owner of all does not contradict this. We agree that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, but in giving man dominion over the earth God has also assigned certain property rights to individuals. One man owns this house, another owns this car and not everyone owns the same amount. Is there a problem with that? Is that somehow opposed to God's order of

things? Absolutely not. Don't listen to Marxist Bible-quoters who believe the government should own everything so that nobody would have a nickel more than the next guy. As nice as that sounds to some that is not God's way. The Scriptures recognize the existence of rich people and poor people. It directs the rich to be generous and the poor to be industrious but it nowhere recommends the establishment of a classless society. And in those places where that supposed ideal has been tried the clear result has been the impoverishment of everybody except the ones running the show. Scriptural teaching supports free-market economics because of the right to private property. I Timothy 6:**17-18** *Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. 18 Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.* That is how God speaks to the rich. With instruction, not condemnation. Private ownership is God's idea and He protects it with these commandments against theft.

We may say more about that later. For now let's begin to look at what exactly we are forbidden to do by our commandment. I have a list of six things. I would like to have made the list smaller, but I think all of these are important. The first violation of our text is what we might call common theft. That is the plain and simple taking of what belongs to another. Clearly, the thief who breaks into your home and takes off with your set of Matthew Henry Commentaries has done wrong. But you would never think of doing that would you? Most Americans who aren't on drugs have too much conscience to steal from their neighbor. But there are some forms of common thievery with which we seem to have no problem. There is a huge problem in our society of people stealing from their employer. Those things that are given to you for the accomplishment of your job you take for your personal use. To a certain extent I expect your employer will permit your doing that but how many times have you crossed the line? How much personal use of the copy machine is legitimate? I read about a revival in Wales around 80 years ago in which God moved mightily among the workers in a shipyard. One of the results was that so many people were convicted by God's Spirit about taking things from the shipyard that they had to open up a special division just for the return of stolen merchandise. And after a while the company took out an ad in the paper asking folks not to bring back anymore stuff because they couldn't process it all. That is what I call bringing forth the fruits of repentance. Some of you may need to do the same. Stealing from your employer is not okay. Neither is it okay to steal from your parents. I'm speaking to you kids here and maybe to some adults with good memories. Have you been honest with your parents about your handling of

money? Have you respected their possessions and used wisely what they have given you, or have you treated it lightly? Some of you have snatched money from mom's purse even this week. What does God think of that? Just because it belongs to your parents doesn't mean it's yours. God doesn't wink at inner-family theft. It's not okay to steal from your employer or your parents and finally, it's not okay to steal from the distant and invisible. The what? The distant and invisible. Here is what I mean. There are some occasions in which we may take what belongs to another person and they wouldn't even know. They wouldn't even miss it. And we tend to think that is okay. But it's not. Here I am thinking about our violations of copyright laws. I'm talking about certain forms of computer theft. I'm talking about illegally duplicating music cds. I've been guilty of that. Several years ago God convicted me over it and I had to throw away a number of tapes which I had illegally recorded. You may apply this sermon in that same conscience-freeing way.

The second way we violate the commandment against stealing is through unjust business practices. And please understand that not everything that is legal is ethical. Many times, you know this, many times, companies will underbid a project to get your business and then once they have the job they will informally blackmail you by threatening to hold up the project if you don't pay more than the bid amount. I suppose it's legal but it's certainly not right. When you sell a car that has a significant problem do you try to hide it, talk around it, keep it a secret or do you treat the person like you would want to be treated - with complete honesty about the product you are selling? There are lots of fancy ways, legal ways to rob people of their money. Don't excuse them for yourself or your business.

Violation #3 of the command against theft is a failure to pay what you owe, when you owe it. If you enter an agreement to purchase something you are obligated before God to pay it. Romans 12:**8a** *Owe no one anything*. Now that doesn't mean it's wrong to obligate yourself in some way. It means it is wrong to not fulfill the obligation. Not paying your bills on time is a form of theft. Now that seems to be a trademark of our society, and strangely, the legal system stands ready to defend the irresponsible. And if your bank makes stupid loans, that's okay Uncle Sam will make us all pay to cover the bill. I'm no legal expert but as best I understand bankruptcy, it is not an option Christians should take to permanently resolve debts. It may be necessary as a stop-gap, but the courts do not exist to rescue you from contractual obligations into which you freely entered. We need to take seriously what we say we will do. Psalm 37:**21a** *The wicked borrows and does not pay back*. The righteous man fulfills his obligations.

Violation #4 of our text is lazy or sorry work. When you are being paid to do a job and you don't work at it with diligence you are no better than the guy who steals from the boss. Proverbs 18:9 *He also who is slack in his work is brother to him who destroys.* ® Do you understand that? God is in favor of productivity. And the lazy worker, like a vandal, is anti-productive. I wonder, Christian, I wonder what the people you work with would say about your diligence on the job. Are you giving your employer a hard day's work, a full day's work? Can you leave the office knowing that you have earned your wages?

The fifth way people violate the command against theft is by not paying their taxes. All that is due. You know, Jesus was asked about this and he made plain that you are to render to Caesar that portion of your wealth that goes to civil government. Romans 13:7 *Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due.* Now it doesn't suggest that you need to pay more than your government requires. I think, given the state of the state, our monies are much better used in the church. To what extent you can move your wealth toward God's kingdom rather than Barack's kingdom you should. But, there is only so much you can do legally. You will pay taxes, different kinds of taxes, lots of taxes. And Christians are to pay what they are assessed. As much as you may not like our government, cheating on your tax reports violates God's law. When you don't pay a dollar what happens? The rest of us, or our children, have to pay that dollar. Years ago I bought a used car from a man. I paid about \$2,500. When we went to settle and change titles he handed me the state tax form and invited me to write in whatever price I chose. You see, I would have to pay sales tax to the state based on the price of the car. Knowing that I was a pastor this guy invited me to lie. But if I don't pay my share what have I done? I have not only lied, I have stolen from you because you will have to make up the difference. Pay what you owe, to God, to government and to your neighbor.

The sixth way in which the prohibition against stealing is often violated is by governmental theft. Our government, (and remember that in our system "we" are the government), is stealing from two directions. First, we are stealing governmentally from our children. The point is beyond debate and morally indefensible. We have, as a nation, a seventeen trillion dollar debt that increases every second. It is hard to even imagine such a debt, as we never think of trillions of anything. Your calculators don't go up this high. A trillion has 12 zeroes. Our national debt is seventeen times that large and growing. Now, I ask you, who is going to pay for all this? It will either be covered in enormous taxes or thru hyper-inflation which is the most vicious tax of all. We have borrowed like

crazy because of a colossal selfishness that has expressed total indifference to the needs of our children. For every dollar our government spends, it borrows \$.46 – nearly half of it! The long and short of it is this. Our seventeen trillion dollar debt is the fruit of generational theft. By our self-indulgence on a national level we have literally robbed our children. Thomas Jefferson wrote, “The question whether one generation has the right to bind another by the deficits imposes is a question of such consequence as to place it among the fundamental principles of government. We should consider ourselves unauthorized to saddle posterity with our debts and morally bound to pay them ourselves.” Did you hear that last part? Morally bound. Many Christians I know, when they discuss politics like to distinguish between moral issues and economic issues. But, hey, economic principles are founded in morality. God has said, “Thou shalt not steal.” For a nation to borrow money year after year is not just financial mismanagement it is sin.

I said there were two directions from which our government is stealing. One is from our children, the other is from the taxpayers. Governments have a God-ordained responsibility to maintain order by punishing evil doers but our government has gone way beyond that and has become an agent for the redistribution of wealth. Now, I know full well that some of you get nervous when Pastor Dan starts talking like this because you feel we are slipping from the realm of religion or faith or the gospel into politics? I get that, but I am trying to be faithful to the message of Ephesians four and its relevance for our day. There is no way to make sense of our text without buying into the sanctity of private property. And, since we live in a society where we have a voice in the governmental process, we need to see the importance of respecting property rights. Please don't get me wrong. God is all for charity. Ephesians 4:28 commends that. God says much about taking care of the poor, but that was never meant to be the government's job. There was never decreed in God's word a poor tax whereby money is taken from the rich and given to the poor. Richard Chewning says, “When we take a person's possessions by law and redistribute them by law we rob everyone of his dignity, responsibility and potential for generosity.” God commands the rich to be generous and to be ready to share but He doesn't permit the government to make them do it. You see the difference?

It is interesting to me that so often these days I hear the word “justice” used to refer to something which sounds a whole lot like charity. And I think that indicates a major cultural shift which has taken place over the last 100 years and can really be traced to the philosophy of Karl Marx and the attitude of the Bolshevik Revolution. It is the sense that the rich uniformly got that way thru some

devious means; and the poor, well they are poor because of oppression by the rich. Socialists and communists all over the world have agitated for a welfare state, for a totalitarian government on the basis of class envy. They have nurtured a general hatred of the rich on the part of the lower classes, with the result that most people think it is okay to steal from someone if he or she is rich. You think about it. Many of us don't feel guilty about stealing from a Sam Walton or from Uncle Sam for that matter. They are rich, and the attitude is that they owe me, and if I have to steal it to get it, well that's okay. But its even neater and cleaner if the government will steal if for me. So, let's vote in politicians who promise to raise taxes on the rich. Let's vote for the guy who will take from the rich and give to the poor, even if you wreck the economy of the nation and the morality of the people in so doing. My friends, not only is it bad economics to soak the rich with high taxes for the sake of funding our social programs, it is theft. When God instituted a "tax," His plan for raising money was to charge ten percent across the board. That means the rich pay more than the poor, yes. But they paid the same percentage. Anything else given by the wealthy was voluntary – encouraged, but not required. Practically speaking, what is my point/ Whether it is done for the sake of health care or to provide cash for clunkers, the redistribution of wealth in a society is a form of theft, a violation of the sanctity of private property. It is a theft entered into by well-meaning, good-hearted people, but it is strategically disastrous and morally corrupt. People who would never think of sticking a gun at Art Rooney's head and demanding his money will elect politicians whose stated policy, in so many words, is to do exactly that. And if we contribute to such a thieving form of government either by our votes or our apathy we stand guilty.

Finally, we are done with our six forms of stealing. Let's finish with a quick look at the positive side of Paul's exhortation. What would be the opposite of stealing? Ephesians 4:28 *He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.* There you see the two attitudes that contrast with that of the robber. You see the attitude of responsibility and the attitude of giving.® First, let's think about the attitude of responsibility which contrasts with the attitude of entitlement.. This is the spirit which says, "It is my job to take care of me of me and my own. And I do it through my labor." There is nothing here of the government or the rich or my parents owing me anything. And this is the attitude God intends for us to have. Now the Lord doesn't want us trusting in self as opposed to Him, and He doesn't want us so proud that we refuse to accept charity when charity is needed or help when help is needed. But God does expect us to look to self rather than

someone else to provide our needs. And He requires us to work. Work is a duty not a right.® We have a right to pursue happiness, but some people don't want to pursue it, they want it delivered at no charge. Don Richardson is a missionary statesmen who opposes giving anything other than medical care free to the foreign poor. He writes this in *Mission Frontiers* magazine about his work in Africa: *I dispensed medicine free of charge to the ill but strengthened the remarkable work ethic of the people by requiring them to work for everything else they wanted from me. Learning that a Roman Catholic priest was doling out goods free three Sawi men asked me if he did that because he was richer than me or loves people more. I said, "It is because he sees them as children and himself as their father. If I saw you as children I would do same. But I know you are men just as much as I am. That is why I require you to work for what you need." They were quite pleased to know I regarded them as men.* I find that very interesting. II Thessalonians 3:**10** *Even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.* <sup>12</sup> *Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.* What is the spirit behind that? Is that cruel? No, that is godliness. Anyone who expects to get has to put out to the degree that they are able. And to provide for the lazy is to subsidize their indolence. Such a practice doesn't help anybody, indeed it dehumanizes a man and strips him of dignity. Abraham Lincoln said: *You cannot strengthen the weak by weakening the strong. You cannot help the wage earner by pulling down the wage payer. You cannot further the brotherhood of man by encouraging class hatred. You cannot keep out of trouble by spending more than you earn. You cannot build character and courage by taking away man's initiative and independence. You cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves.* Notice – the apostle in the passage we read says to *eat your own bread*. Don't go looking for handouts. Look for work. That is the attitude of responsibility

Then there is the attitude of charity. Ephesians 4 said we should labor with what in view? Not only our own needs, and not only those of our family, but the needs of others. There will always be those in genuine distress and the righteous person will work hard enough not only to provide for Himself but to assist others in need, starting with his own family. He is one who believes that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The thief says that what you have is mine. The man of God says, "what I have is yours." Can you honestly say that is an attitude that marks your life? When you come into more money how do you respond? Do you say, "Oh boy, now I can buy..." Or do

you say, “Oh boy, now I can help...” The issue here goes much deeper than the checkbook. It is an issue of the heart. That man who is a restoration project of Jesus Christ, who has been made new by His Spirit, is going to display some real change in this dimension of his personality. He will display the attitude of responsibility and He will display the attitude of giving. And friend, more than spiritual talk, more than heroic deeds in Jesus’ name, and more than emotional praying a lifestyle of responsibility and charity will mark out the man or woman who is filled with the Spirit of God. There are givers and there are takers. Which are you determined to be?

We who believe in Jesus come at this from an interesting place. We believe we are saved by grace. We believe we are unworthy recipients of the greatest charity of all. We understand that, with respect to our standing with God, we have supplied nothing. It has all been a gift to us. So, we don’t despise the needy; we care for the needy cause we know they are us. But, once we are lifted up by Jesus, it is our ambition to imitate the One who saves us and become a source of supply and mercy and help for others. Let’s all take a minute right now to reflect on what we’ve considered and how our Lord would have it affect our living.....Prayer and benediction