

Text: Exod. 22:1-15

Title: Israel's civil law: dealing with thieves.

Time: 10/3/2021 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Our neighboring town, Peterborough, NH, had some trouble with thieves this summer. A recent news story showed their town's sign, which greets travelers at their town border with "Welcome to Peterborough, a nice place to live," having been marred with the unfortunate emendation, "Welcome to Peterborough, a nice place to rip off." Someone put the words "to rip off" over the words "to live" on their town sign.

Last July and August town officials discovered that a total of \$2.3MM, intended for the school district and for bridge construction, was sent by ACH transfer to thieves instead. The crime was facilitated by the internet, email, and cryptocurrency. One of the lessons of these events is the truth that mankind's technological achievements make his ability to break the Ten Commandments much more destructively powerful. Man needs more than technological advance. He needs salvation from his sin.

The Eighth Commandment instructed the Israelites: "Thou shalt not steal." God gave them our passage this morning because He knew that they would break that commandment. We are in a passage of Exodus in which the redeemed people of God are learning what it is going to take to obey God's law. The Lord wants His redeemed people to live lives that are lawful. In Israel's context, these laws were civil law, because Israel was a theocratic nation. So, the title of the message this morning is "Israel's civil law: dealing with thieves." I want us to see four things the passage teaches about dealing with thieves this morning.

I. Thieves must repay what they have stolen (vv. 1, 4).

Illustration: Imagine you are a member of the select board in Peterborough, and you are opening your September bank statement to balance the town journal, and you find an unexpected deposit there in the amount of \$4.6MM. You call the bank for clarification, and the bank manager explains that someone has left you a note. It says, "I am the one who stole the money, and I want to obey Exod. 22:4 to make this right again."

Application: That is the kind of place the Lord wanted the nation of Israel to be. That is the outcome that is encouraged by God's law in verses 1 and 4 of our passage. While the livestock remained in the possession of the thief unsold and not slaughtered, he could make things right again by repenting of his sin and returning twice as much to the one he had stolen from. The difference in the penalties between verse 1 and verse 4 encourage this repentance. If the thief is caught having profited irreversibly from his theft, he is responsible to pay four or five-fold back, depending on the monetary value of the theft.

Thieves must repay what they have stolen, and they must do so with reciprocating generosity. According to God's law, the cure for theft is not simply paying back what was taken. The true cure for theft is great generosity. Paul put this truth this way for New Testament local churches: "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth" (Eph. 4:28).

And all this reminds us of what happened to the greedy thievery of a man named Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). As a Jewish chief tax-collector for Rome, Zacchaeus was a very

rich man who took advantage of an oppressed people. Jesus comes under the condemnation of these people because he offers to visit Zacchaeus in his opulent home. This tax-collector was a hated thief.

But for some strange reason there came a day when all his riches and creature comforts could not keep Zacchaeus out of a sycamore tree so that he could get a glimpse of Jesus. Jesus finds him there and spends the day with him. When it is all over Zacchaeus is a changed man. The chief thief gives half of his wealth to the poor and restores what he had stolen from others fourfold. Dicken's tale of Scrooge's redemption is more than a fairy tale. It really happened to Zacchaeus. Ghosts of Christmas do not save, but the grace and forgiveness of God found in coming to Jesus Christ does save. It makes the thief an amazingly generous man.

So, thieves must repay what they have stolen, and then some, and Jesus is able to change the life of a thief to make it really happen.

II. Homes should be protected from thieves (vv. 2-3).

Application: These verses explain some of the legal rights of a thief. The simple summary is that if a thief is secretly trespassing under the cover of darkness, the property owner can kill him to protect his home without committing murder. In this case, it is not known whether the intruder is a threat to the personal safety of the home. Of course, in the case of armed robbery, the threat is clear and the same rule would logically apply.

But if the sun comes up and the thief can be dealt with unarmed in the light of day, the property owner must not kill him. The Hebrew idiom that refers to this right to life is the

plural of the word *blood* (*bloods*). When it is ok for a thief to be killed (v. 2), bloods do not belong to him. When it is not ok to be killed (v. 3), bloods do belong to him (note that *shed* is in italics in the KJV). I think this idiom comes from the truth of Gen. 9:6, which mentions two bloods that are significant to human right to life: “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made He man.” If bloods belong to you, the right defined by the two bloods of this verse does. If not, it does not apply. So even thieves have a basic right to life, so long as they are not a credible threat to the life of their victims.

What we learn about this when it comes to the treatment of thieves is that homes should be protected from them when they are a possible threat to the lives of the homeowner, but their lives should be protected when no such threat exists. The Second Amendment of the US Constitution is a related concern for us as Americans. It forbids governments from infringing the right of citizens to keep and bear arms to protect their security and freedom: “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed.” The idea that the security and freedom of a State relies on an armed people rather than a militarized government is the same wisdom we find here – namely, that homes should be protected from thieves.

III. Unintended consequences may be the crime of theft (vv. 5-6).

Application: It is clear from these verses that the man whose animal consumed his neighbor’s crops or whose fire burned them did not intend to steal. Still, in spite of his lack of motive, the unintended consequence of his irresponsibility is dealt with as though it were the crime of theft.

In the days of the prophet Malachi, the Lord surprised His people by calling them thieves (Mal. 3:8-12, "Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the Lord of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the Lord of hosts.").

The Israelites who failed to tithe thought that they had done nothing wrong, but God calls their neglect stealing. The Lord had great blessings in store for those who repented of this crime.

In the New Testament era we do not find an emphasis on the ten-percent of tithing per se, but Paul finds the same sin of stealing in Corinthian believers who failed to support the gospel ministry of their local church in a generous way (2 Cor. 11:7-9, "Have I committed an offence in abasing myself that ye might be exalted, because I have preached to you the gospel of God freely? I robbed other churches, taking wages of them, to do you service. And when I was present with you, and wanted, I was chargeable to no man: for that which was lacking to me the brethren which came from Macedonia supplied: and in all things I have kept myself from being burdensome unto you, and so will I keep myself.").

Paul said he was robbing other churches to minister to believers who refused to give generously. The Corinthians did not intend to be party to robbing other churches, but that is how the Lord saw it. We need to be a church that pays our own way through the freewill gifts of God's people. To do less is the unintended consequence of theft.

IV. Breach of trust is theft (v. 7-15).

Application: These verses describe what is to be done when a valuable possession is placed in the care of another, who is unable to return it to its rightful owner for various reasons. In some cases, the one in whose care the possessions were entrusted has committed a breach of trust by acting irresponsibly, and in such cases the crime of theft has been committed.

Ponzi scheme is a term that comes immediately to my mind when it comes to this kind of thing in our day and age. *Malfeasance* and *fraud* are another couple of terms. Washington D.C. is the place that comes immediately to mind, where the amount stolen from future Americans currently stands at nearly 29 trillion dollars. None of us voted for people to go to Washington to bankrupt our grandchildren or our elderly who are on a fixed income with inflation. What has happened there is a breach of trust. It is a form of theft.

Our Bibles tell us of a trust that each of us as believers must keep in 1 Timothy 6. That chapter talks about making sure that money does not become our master. It tells us that godliness with contentment is great gain. The chapter ends Paul's letter with these words: "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: Which some professing have erred concerning the faith. Grace be

with thee. Amen” (vv. 20-21). Like Timothy in his day, we have been entrusted with the faith once delivered to the saints. When we err from the faith, we breach that trust, and we stand as thieves before God’s law.

Conclusion: So, we have seen four things the passage teaches about dealing with thieves. As we close, we should be thankful that we live in a country where law enforcement officials deal with thieves. Our passage mentions those officials in verses 8-9. The word for *judges* there is *elohim*, the plural of the word *God*. This grammatical convention captures what Paul says in Romans 13 about law enforcement officials. God has given them the sword they carry. Their authority comes from Him, and we must respect that authority, submit to it, and pray for these officials.

But the last word that the Bible speaks about how to deal with thieves comes from Mount Calvary. There Jesus died between two thieves. One thief cursed Him. The other turned to Him, hanging there at the end of his life of crime, and made a simple request: “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus responds – “Today, you shall be with Me in paradise.”

That thief, unlike the other, saw his sin, his need for forgiveness, the truth that Jesus had done nothing amiss, that Jesus died unjustly but he justly, and that Jesus, in dying there as God’s spotless Lamb, would soon be enthroned as King of a kingdom not of this world. The thief asked to be let into that kingdom, though he knew he could never deserve to be, and when asked this way, Jesus always says “Yes” with great joy (Heb. 12:2).

Which thief are we this morning? What will we believe about Jesus on the cross? What will we ask the Savior,

given our long life of many crimes? The Crucified One is listening for your request this morning. What will He hear you ask?

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching